NEW WESTERN

MAGAZINE

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

15¢
FEB.

2 SMASHING NOVELS!

STRANGER IN CHEYENNE
by LEE SAVAGE, JR.

HELL-ON-THE-LAW!
by THOMAS THOMPSON

CHESHIRE - OBETS - BODRERO

WHY THOUSANDS SAY...

"It's Lee 6 to 1"

Lee Leadership is built on many sound, proven facts.

The Lee Guarantee . . . Your Lee garment must look better, fit better, and wear longer than any other you have ever worn, or you can have a new pair free or your money back.

Lee Tailored Sizes . . . A perfect fit for every build . . . tall, short, slim, or stout.

Famous Lee Jelt Denim . . . Made of selected long-fiber cotton and woven into tough, long wearing denim.

Exclusive Lee Fabrics . . . Smart colors in really tough, handsome materials.

Fadeproof Fabrics . . . Many of the exclusive Lee fabrics are vat dyed and fadeproof.

Sanforized . . . Shrinkage guaranteed less than one per cent.

That's why Lee won first place in a nation-wide survey* among working men on the question: "What brand of overalls do you prefer?" *Lee Jelt Denim Overalls led the next brand by a margin of 6 to 1!*

Buy Lee work clothes . . . at leading stores coast-to-coast.

**Survey made by a prominent publishing company.*

THERE'S A LEE FOR EVERY JOB!

JELT DENIM OVERALLS • UNION-ALLS • MATCHED SHIRTS AND PANTS DUNGAREES • COWBOY PANTS

UNION MADE
Lee
Highest Quality
WORK CLOTHES

COPYRIGHT 1947
THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.

Kansas City, Mo. • Minneapolis, Minn.
Trenton, N. J. • San Francisco, Calif.
South Bend, Ind. • Salina, Kansas

WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

HERB'S ARROW HIT THE MARK AND THEN . . .
W-W-WHY, DAD! HE DROPPED AND I DIDN'T EVEN SHOOT!
NOBODY SHOT! IT'S FANTASTIC!
AN ARROW! AND RIGHT THROUGH THE CHEST!
REMARKABLE! LOOK, HERE COMES OUR ROBIN HOOD
HERB HALL! WHY, DAD, HE'S THE MOVIE ARCHER!
DISCOVERED BENEATH MY BACKWOOD'S BEARD. AND AREN'T YOU PAUL LAURIE, THE FAMOUS HUNTER?
THANKS FOR THE LIFT WITH THAT BUCK. MAY I DRIVE YOU TO YOUR CAMP?
FINE! AND SAY . . . IT'S NEAR DINNER TIME. WHY NOT JOIN US?
I'D LIKE TO SHAVE BEFORE WE EAT BUT HAVEN'T A RAZOR IN MY CAR
COME ALONG AND USE MINE
THIS IS THE BLADE FOR ME! SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE EVER HAD
LOTS OF MY FRIENDS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE MIGHTY EASY ON YOUR FACE
SO NEXT WEEK WE HOP TO ALASKA FOR GIANT MOOSE. LIKE TO COME ALONG?
WOULD I! AND HOW!
WONDERFUL . . HE'S KEEN
TAKE ALONG SOME THIN GILLETTES, PAL
YOU LOOK AND FEEL RIGHT ON THE BEAM WHEN YOU SHAVE WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE SHARPEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. WHAT'S MORE . . . AND THIS IS IMPORTANT . . . THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PERFECTLY, PROTECTING YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES AND FAULTY SHAVING METHODS. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 10

THE LATEST AND BEST IN WESTERN FICTION

NEW WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢

Vol. 13 FEBRUARY, 1947 No. 3

CONTENTS

Two Smashing Frontier Novels

STRANGER IN CHEYENNE.....Les Savage, Jr. 8
The lawless Black Hills rocked with gun-thunder when Webb Fannin issued his no-right-of-way defiance to these man-breaking merchants of sudden death—the Laramie Cattle Association!

HELL-ON-THE-LAW!.....Thomas Thompson 76
The gun and star that Marshal Rod Silvers wore had been bought and paid for by town boss Lacy Prentice. But for his lawman's honor that fighting marshal demanded a price that could be paid only with the worthless life of every bush-whacker in Bainville!

Hard-Hitting Western Novelette

BOOTHILL'S BEST BRONC-BUSTER.....Bob Obets 48
The ghost of his slick-draw sire and every iron-toting wraith in Boothill stood behind Rand Allison when he set out to teach his neighbors a Texas lesson in guts: That not every lead-throwing gunman is man enough to tame a thousand pounds of four-footed lightning!

Four Gripping Short Stories

SLOW-MOTION GUN-HAND!.....Giff Cheshire 33
Slow-motion Ossie Malone set himself a strange task: To eat his way through a mountain of bacon, beans—and bullets!

LITTLE BILL'S PARDNER.....Marvin J. Jones 39
The only way to quench a killer's thirst, little Bill knew—is with his own blood!

THE THREE-CORNERED WAR.....Stone Cody 58
How much dynamite does it take to blow a man's friends to hell?

THE LONG RIDE HOME.....John Bodrero 68
"You can draw anybody's brand with a running iron," the kid told old Pete, "even if it costs you a thousand dollars. . . ."

New Western Features

THE RIPROARIOUS WEST.....Robbins and Farren 47
THROUGH HELL TO MONTEREY!.....Roy Vandergoot 75
THE STRAWBOSS.....The Editor 6

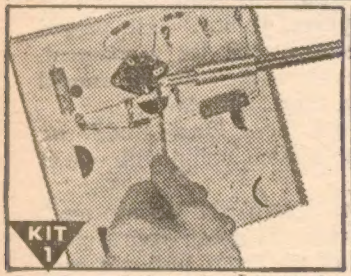
ALL STORIES NEW
NO REPRINTS

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED JANUARY 24!

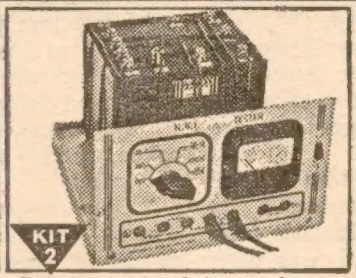
Published monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter February 4, 1946, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1946, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $1.80; other countries 50c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

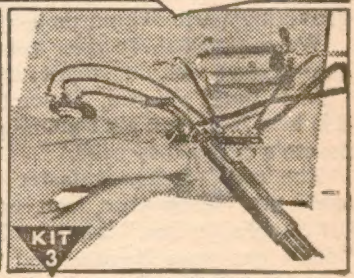
I Send You 6 Big Kits of Radio Parts



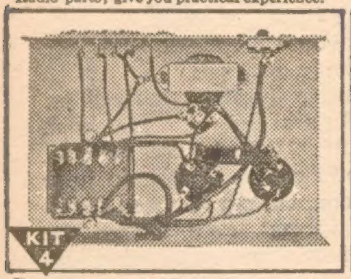
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



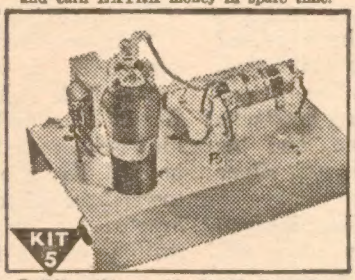
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



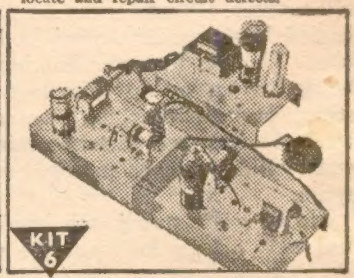
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO—*Win Success*

I Will Train You at Home—SAMPLE LESSON FREE

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio," both FREE. See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with 6 BIG KITS OF PARTS I send!

Many Beginners Soon Make Extra Money In Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while still learning! It's probably easier to get started now than ever before, because the Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even *greater* opportunities as Television, FM, and Electronic devices become available to the public! Send for FREE books now!

My Course Includes Training in TELEVISION * ELECTRONICS

Find Out What NRI Can Do for You

Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my FREE 64-page book. Read the details about my Course; letters from men I trained; see how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just MAIL COUPON NOW in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7BS9, National Radio Institute, *Pioneer Home Study Radio School*, Washington 9, D. C.

Approved for Training under GI Bill

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7BS9
National Radio Institute
Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE, your sample lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... Zone... State.....

★ THE STRAWBOSS ★

OUR FEET were parked comfortably on the packing case that passes for a desk in these parts, while we read a Tom Roan story for next month's *New Western Magazine,* when suddenly a loop appeared out of nowhere and settled down over our chest. We made a couple of motions to get to our holster, but the loop just got tighter and tighter. Finally we gave up and just sat still.

"Y'all done fussin' and frettin'?" a thin, quavering voice behind us asked.

We recognized the voice immediately and knew what to do about the situation. "Uncle Bud," we said, "if you don't unloose this here loop, you ain't gonna get into next month's Strawboss page."

The rope slackened faster than a gent could say "Draw yore, iron, pardner."

"Shucks, Junior," the thin old voice said, "don't get yore dander up. I was only havin' my little joke."

We turned around and looked at the little old rooster. It was lucky he had his high-heeled boots on or we might have missed him. The old boy was looking older than he had when we saw him last, but he was still as perky as ever, his drooping mustache washed clean of tobacco juice, and his watery old blue eyes as bright as new silver spurs.

He flicked a quirly ash into our inkwell and took a long look out the window, his glance traveling over the tall buildings that rose like mountain pinnacles from the city floor. "Shore have a perty view from here, Junior," he said. "Reckon a man could see clear over to the Yewnited Nations."

"Is that what brought you here, Uncle Bud?" we asked. "You come to study the international siutation?"

"That's right, Junior. Only I'm fixin' tc do more than just study things, son. I'm goin' down to offer my experience to them diplymats on the subject of peace-makin'. Junior, there ain't a man east or west of the Santa Fe Trail with my experience at makin' peace."

"How come, Uncle Bud?" we asked.

"Junior, when you been married as long as I have, you'll just nacherly become an expert at makin' peace. There ain't nothin' like bein' married to make a man both a peace-maker and a peace-lover. I never told you about how I made peace with yore Aunt Sally, did I, son?"

"No, Uncle Bud," we said.

"I lost that peace, Junior." He tugged gloomily at his mustache for a moment. "Then there was the famous three-cornered war, twixt Sally, Hazel and Anne."

"What happened there, Uncle Bud?" we asked, pausing to scratch a shin with one of our spurs.

"They stopped fightin' and lit into me." The old gent flicked his noose over a chair at the other end of the room, pulled it over to him and sat down wearily. His face lit up for a moment. "Peggy, Helen and Julie —No, that didn't work out either."

"Maybe what you need, Uncle Bud," we suggested, "is more practise."

The little frontier flyweight ignored us. "Rose Ellen and Carol Sue—?" He shook his head dejectedly. "I'm a failure, Junior," he said. He shot a stream of tobacco juice toward the spittoon, but out of sheer down-heartedness, he missed, even though the spittoon wasn't more than twenty feet away. "You see how it is, Junior?" he said. He started to coil up his rope, ambling toward the door. Then he turned around and regarded us.

"Junior," he said, "maybe I ain't been an all-fired success as a peace-maker, but I've shore larned one lesson that you kin take out to them folks at Flushing Medders. Junior, there's only one way to make permanent peace and that's to shuck yore iron and talk it out. No fight was ever settled with a sixgun."

He disappeared through the doorway. A moment later his head appeared again around the door-jamb. "Junior!" he yelled.

We looked up, raising our eyebrows.

"Junior, what's the publishin' date for next month's *New Western?"*

"January 24th, Uncle Bud," we said.

The old rooster's mustache waggled in the doorway. "You better start workin' on it then, son. They ain't much time left."

—THE EDITOR

SCHOOL for VETERANS!

Learn while you earn!

You're in a class by yourself with I.C.S.—and Courses are free to you under the G.I. Bill of Rights!

• I. C. S. Courses, paid for by the Government, are now available to honorably discharged World War II Veterans. And the Government's investment in your training will NOT be deducted from any future bonus.

• Get started now on your studies for success in business or industry! With I. C. S. you can do this in your spare time *while holding down a job!* You're in a class by yourself. There's no one to hold you back . . . you progress just as fast as your abilities and ambition permit!

• Courses cover more than 400 commercial and technical subjects—many listed below. Check the subject that interests you—or write it in. We'll send you full information on the Course—and complete instructions on how to enroll with us under the G.I. Bill of Rights. Act *now!*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3280-W, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

*Name*_____ *Age*_____ *Home Address*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____ *Present Position*_____

*Working Hours*_____ *A.M. to*_____ *P.M.* **Length of Service in World War II**_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Enrollment under the G.I. Bill of Rights approved for War II Veterans.

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

Smashing Saga of Gun-Thunder in the Black Hills!

The bottled gold that lined the walls of the Spanishtown Saloon, and the rich, rolling Xaymaca graze were both ripe pickings for the Laramie Cattle Association. But to Xaymaca Strawboss Webb Fannin, who was sworn to defend them, they were only a double-barreled invitation to death at the hands of every gun-slinging, get-rich-quick land-grabber in the lawless Black Hills!

O'Riley caught the man's bridle, pulling himself up against the horse.

STRANGER IN CHEYENNE

By LES SAVAGE, JR.

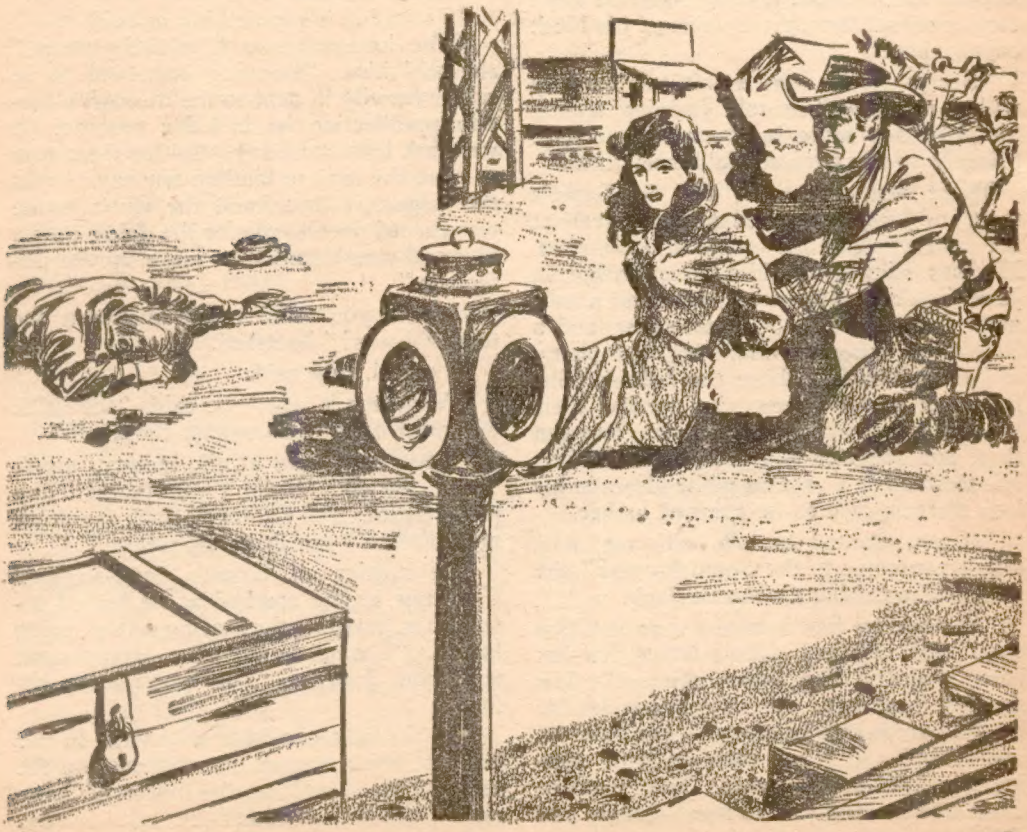
CHAPTER ONE

Job for a Combine-Buster

A RIDER came out of timber and slid his horse down the loose shale of the steep cutbank into the road. Perhaps it was the abruptness of his appearance that sent a strange little chill through Jamaica, stiffening her against the leather upholstery of the buggy seat. She tilted her parasol to one side for a better look at the horsebacker, the hot spring sun of Wyoming Territory shining brilliantly across the dark oval of her face and gleaming in blue-black ripples across the roll of her hair beneath the bottom of her pink bonnet. Her close-fitting basque of black velvet rose across her deep bosom as she took a breath to speak.

"Don't stop, Ochorios."

"Git out de way, mister," called her Negro driver. "We not goin' to stop."



The man did not move his horse, and Jamaica leaned forward, knuckles gleaming like pale ivory through the skin as she clutched the handle of her umbrella. "Tell him again, don't stop."

"Git out de way," called Ochorios, snapping the whip over the matched blacks of the team and trying to wheel them past the man. But spring rains had turned the road muddy and the back end of the buggy slewed around, throwing Jamaica heavily against the leather side panels. When she had pulled herself erect again, she saw that they had halted, the hind wheels almost off the road, the horsebacker holding the bits of her off black. Two other riders had come up from the brush below the road.

Kaycee Grant was chairman of the Laramie Cattle Association, a solid, square man in his early forties, rich brown sideburns reaching down his face from beneath the broad brim of his black Mormon hat. There was a certain substantial respectability in the way his belly pushed at the bed-of-flowers vest beneath his short-skirted town coat, mud splattering the shine of his black cavalry boots.

"Seems to me you aren't too friendly with a neighbor," he told Jamaica, sidling his sleek bay mare in toward the buggy. "Surely you recognized California Jack."

There was something odd in Grant's tone, and Jamaica glanced apprehensively at the man who had first come into the road. He was slim and rakish, this California Jack, in California foxed pants and a vest made from the hide of a pinto cow, and a Remington hung low on his leg with plenty of handle showing above the holster. She had seen enough men who carried their hardware that way to discriminate between them and the men who carried it another. His teeth made a vagrant white gleam in his long narrow face as he grinned at her.

"If you wanted to talk with me, why didn't you come to the Spanishtown?" she said, still watching California Jack.

"Perhaps we find it more convenient this way," said Kaycee Grant, tilting his hat back slightly. "Or more private." His shrewd, hazel eyes were barely perceptible behind narrowed lids, studying her face. "I understand you're not satisfied with owning a saloon in Cheyenne. The Spanishtown was making you so much money you decided to put some of it in the cattle business. It's been rumored you bought the old DY spread."

"It is no longer the DY," she said, the precision of her English marred by that faint accent. "It is now Xaymaca."

"For what?" he said.

"For where I come from," she said. "When Columbus first landed on Jamaica, the Arawak Indians possessed the Island. They called it Xaymaca."

Grant had watched her face in that speculative way, his underlip tucked up under his teeth. "The estate went into litigation when old man Denning died. I understand the courts weren't accepting bids on the land till May tenth."

"I know you understand that," she said. "And so did your lawyer. That's why you didn't get the land, isn't it, Mr. Grant?" She held up a slim hand as he started to speak. "Never mind, I know the Laramie Cattle Association wanted the land."

"We're a little crowded for graze on our eastern pasture," he said slowly.

"Are you?" she said.

"You think it's something more?"

"The interpretation is entirely yours," she told him. "Denning happened to be rather heavily in debt to me through a certain predilection he had for roulette. It wouldn't have done any good for the courts to open the land to bidding anyway. I was the largest creditor, and the whole estate was turned over to me for the debts, plus a financial consideration to make up the difference."

"Would you mind telling me what the total bill was?" he asked.

"I would," she said.

"Whatever it was," he said, "the LCA will meet it, and add twenty thousand."

"Your cattle are really hungry, aren't they?" she said. "I don't want to sell at any price, Grant. Tell California Jack to release my horse so I can drive on, please."

The rigging of Grant's hand-stamped Cheyenne saddle creaked as he leaned toward her, grasping the bracing on the spring buggy. "I want to make an arrangement with you, Jamaica. You won't leave before."

The sunlight caught a wild flash in her brilliant black eyes as she stiffened on the seat, calling sharply to the driver. "Ochorios. Dashow, dashow!"

"Hold him, Jack," called Grant, and

sidled his bay in against the buggy, starting to swing aboard. But Ochorios had snapped the lash above the off black and though California Jack was still trying to block the team, it startled the matched animals into their traces enough to jerk the buggy forward before they crashed into Jack's horse. It threw Grant off to the side and he had to throw himself completely out of the saddle, clutching wildly to maintain his grip on the bracing of the buggy seat.

"Dashow, Ochorios," cried Jamaica shrilly, rising up to beat at Grant with the umbrella.

"Get her, Owlie!" shouted Grant in a hoarse voice, ducking his head beneath the blows. "Get her!"

THE THIRD rider swung his horse to the back of the buggy and climbed up on the saddle to jump in from there. He was a short, sloppy man, this Owlie French, in baggy pants and a soiled hickory jacket, and Jamaica caught a momentary impression of the black stubble beard around his contorted mouth as he jumped in. The rest happened so swiftly it lost definition for her, in the tilting, jerking buggy, pulled from one side to the other by the rearing, frightened team, with Ochorios standing up in the seat, swaying from side to side, his eyes rolling white in a black face gleaming with sweat, and Kaycee Grant's struggling figure and hoarse curses, and the blurred movement of Owlie French's squat body over the let-down top.

"Get out of there!" someone roared, so loud it seemed to deafen her. "It looks like Cheyenne needs some lessons on how to treat a lady," and the buggy tilted beneath her so far with the shift of weight in it that Jamaica had to grasp wildly at the high driver's seat in front of her to keep from being thrown out. Crouched there against the front stays, she realized Owlie French was no longer visible above the telescoped top on the back. She had one glimpse of Kaycee Grant's face twisting in surprise, or anger, or pain, and then something came in between her and Grant for a moment, and the buggy shuddered once more. Then she realized she was staring at the back of a man. It moved away from her in a rush, as he jumped over the side, after Grant, whom he had torn off the buggy and thrown to the ground. Grant rolled over and stumbled up onto his feet, but the man was on him then.

Grant was not a small man, himself, and he moved surprisingly fast, pivoting away from the other's charge in order to gain full balance before he was hit, letting the pivot carry his right arm around in a blow calculated to catch the man in his groin. Jamaica felt her own sharp, indrawn breath, for she could see how devastating it would be to take. She heard the man's sick gasp of pain as he jumped right into the blow, and expected to see him double over and fall on past Grant. Instead, that great, animal body blocked Grant off again, and she heard Grant's shout of pain. Then Owlie French came from around behind the buggy, where he must have been thrown, and jumped on the man's back.

Jamaica was on her feet, meaning to jump out of the buggy now, in some dim instinct at aiding the stranger, as he went down beneath Owlie's charge, and the three men rolled across the ground in a tangled heap. But before she could leave the side, she heard that wild roar again, and Owlie French flew bodily up in the air, screaming with pain, and struck the slope to the side of the road, rolling helplessly down till he brought up against the first tree to lie draped about it there, limp and moveless. The stranger had come up beneath Owlie, slugging Grant back down at the same time, and now he stood astraddle Grant, who was no longer trying to rise. California Jack had taken this long to fight his horse around in front of the rearing, frenzied team, and was just turning it broadside toward the struggle.

The stranger whirled toward Jack, and the sun caught whitely across the stag grips of a huge Pond .44 stuck naked through his belt. California Jack's whole body seemed to stiffen with the effort of stopping the motion of his hand above his own gun, and the fingers straightened out over it like a man in pain. He stared blankly at the stranger, as if this were the first recognition, and his voice held a hollow, empty sound.

"Webb Fannin!" he said.

A FAINT breeze fluttered the red tops along the roadbank above the buggy. Farther up on the slope, a long-tailed chat had begun to herald spring with his shrill buffoonery. The woman was still looking

after the three horsemen as they trotted away up the road. It had all been done in a strained, uncomfortable silence, Kaycee Grant starting to say something when he finally got to his feet, then closing his mouth abruptly. Owlie French was still in so much pain that California Jack had been forced to dismount and aid Grant in getting the hickory-jacketed man onto his horse. Fannin had stood by without proffering aid. Jamaica had expected Grant to say something before he left, but even then he did not speak, giving Fannin a strange, twisted look of rage, jerking his bay around and heeling it into a trot. With them gone, Jamaica turned to Fannin, getting her first full impression of the man.

He must have stood well above six feet, but he lacked the awkward appearance of most overly-tall men. The driving musculature of his long straight legs was apparent beneath the tight, grease-slick leggings he wore tucked into a pair of muddy cavalry boots. His hickory shirt was open across his hairy chest and rolled up to the elbows. His face bore the craggy appearance of sculptured granite. The brow jutted out in a crude, indomitable plane above the bright intelligence of his blue eyes. There was something predatory in the questing dominance of his nose. His heavy, square jaw was set forward in a habitual belligerence, belied only by the nebulous little curl which kept playing about one corner of his long, hard mouth. He had shown no particular discomfort beneath Jamaica's long, deliberate study. Finally she spoke, letting it out on a soft breath.

"California Jack seemed to know you."

"I've been through this section before," he said, and the rumbling vibrance of his voice seemed to play over her nerves like the fingers of a hand. "Before you came, I suppose. The Spanishtown? That's your saloon, I hear. Jamaica? What were you shouting at your man when I came on them?"

She shrugged, lower lip forming a petulant line. "I still revert to colloquial expressions, I suppose. Dashow? It's what they shout at the animals in Jamaica to make them go. Ochorios came with me from there. He is a Maroon, from Brown's Town. A descendant of the Negroes who fled to the Cockpit Country to escape the British when they conquered the island."

"Yes'm," grinned the driver from the buggy. He had quieted the animals now, and was watching Jamaica and Fannin. He spoke in a low voice, inaudible to the stranger.

Fannin frowned at him. "What?"

"Never mind," said Jamaica. "You can't understand their jargon unless you come from the island. You say you haven't been to Cheyenne in some time. What brings you back?"

He drew in a breath to answer. The hesitation would not have been perceptible if she had not seen the change in his eyes. They were no longer candid.

"A job," he said.

"The railroad reached Cheyenne this month," she said.

"I'm not a railroad man," he said. "Matter of fact, I don't exactly know what kind of work it is. I was to meet the man in the Spanishtown. Maybe you know."

She shook her head studying him again. "I thought, perhaps, I could make you an offer that would be more interesting than the one you had. But since you don't know—"

His grin was spontaneous enough. "I'm always open to a new proposition. Especially when a beautiful woman is concerned."

She felt a vague irritation pass through her, but dismissed it, nodding her head in the direction Grant had taken to ride away. "That little incident you just broke up. It's the beginning of something. I've acquired some property which has been the center of a lot of trouble during the past two years."

"The old DY spread?" he asked.

"You know?" Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Everybody knows the L. C. A. has been trying to get Denning's former land for their cattle."

"Do they now?" She studied his face a moment before going on. "I don't think Kaycee Grant will stop at this. Naturally, in my business, I have several men hired for their particular talents in connection with things like this. But they're just run-of-the-mill. They might be capable of handling anything that came up at the Spanishtown. I wouldn't feel entirely secure, though, if I thought the Laramie Cattle Association was really going to bring pressure to bear. It's a big organization. It would require someone special—"

"Me?"

"I've seen a lot of men in a lot of fights, Fannin," she said throatily. "I've never seen anything quite like you."

"You're a good judge," he smiled.

"And you're just about as vain as you are efficient," she said, unable to withhold it.

She expected it to draw anger from him, but he merely shrugged. "I know what I am. I haven't met anybody yet who could beat me at my own game, and I haven't found a game yet I couldn't play. Take me on those terms or not at all. As I said, I don't know what the job is I came here for, but a figure was mentioned. Two hundred and fifty a month."

She let her eyes drop to the stag-butted Pond in his belt. "For that?"

"I told you. Any game."

Her glance raised from the gun to meet his eyes. She tried to weigh it in her mind, and decide objectively, but there was an awesome animal magnetism to the man that reached out to her, and somehow, she could not view it objectively.

"I'll make it a hundred more," she said.

"That's worth a look," he said. The smile was back and he had moved toward her. "The amount wouldn't really make a big difference. It's what you throw in besides."

She stiffened. "I suppose that's one game you've played a lot."

"The game I'm best at," he said.

"That's one game," she said, "we *won't* play."

CHAPTER TWO

Strawboss for the Devil's Graze

WEBB FANNIN came out of the bunkshack and stood there a moment, tall and straight against the rotting weatherboarding, looking downslope across the rich meadows of bluegrass to the house. It was as run-down as the bunkshack, paint peeling off its boards, holes left unpatched in the steep roof. Xaymaca—crazy name, he thought. Not content to leave it a normal outfit, with a normal name. Couldn't even hire ordinary cowhands. Those two old whanghides she'd hired didn't know a dally rope from a hollow horn. He shrugged, heading around the corner toward the corrals at the rear. She was a crazy woman. Well, he'd—

"I tell you that new booshway she hired is wrong, somehow." The voice broke in on Fannin's thoughts, coming from behind the bunkshack. "She said he come down to take another job in Cheyenne. Why should he switch and take this one?"

"Jamaica could make a polecat smell beautiful if she took a mind," said the other man.

Fannin was at the corner now, and he could see the two of them. Pappy Clark was a weazened little old man with a mouldy coonskin cap on his perfectly bald head, a red Chimayo blanket worn poncho style for a shirt, hole cut in its center, and the four corners tucked through the waistband of his greasy elkhide trousers. He wore an ancient buccaneer shoulder belt with slots in it for his quartet of huge French smooth-bore pistols, one of which he was always working with.

"Maybe it was the LCA sent for him," said Pappy, screwing at one of the pins in the brass-mounted barrel of the gun he had out now. "They've been known to hire outside iron-slingers."

As large as Webb Fannin was, Terrible Terrance O'Riley topped him by a head. He was an incredibly prodigious man, exuding a singularly repugnant odor of beaver medicine, muffled up in a huge coat of rotting polecat furs one of his Crow squaws had made for him. He was standing by the bars of a small pen where they corralled their horses, holding the jug of corn which seemed to be his constant companion.

"Wouldn't it be sort of silly for me to climb the frame of the Association's chairman if they were the ones who sent for me?" said Fannin, from where he stood at the corner of the building.

It must have been their first awareness, but neither showed any surprise. "That could have been a good little show," said Pappy Clark, spitting on the lock plate of his pistol and polishing it with an edge of his Chimayo. "Maybe the LCA wants someone to work on the inside here."

"Yeah," said Terrible Terrance, taking a swig at his corn. "What happened to that job you had in Cheyenne?"

"I spent a day or so at the Spanishtown," said Fannin. "Nobody showed up to claim me."

"A bit o' poteen, Ballymacooly?" asked Terrible Terrance, raising the jug so his huge red hunter could reach over the bars

of the corral to suck at the top. "It doesn't particularly matter which job you took. You won't last long around here. Jamaica didn't hire us to chase them bovine banshees all over Wyoming Territory just so's we can burn a mark on them the good Lord never intended they should bear anyways. We're here simply to protect the outfit from them LCA marauders."

"If the new crop isn't branded you'll find them in the LCA herd before summer," said Fannin. "There won't be any outfit to protect if the cattle aren't tended. And unless you make up your minds to a little hard work with a dally rope and stamping iron, I'm hunting for a new crew."

"Is that a fact?" said Pappy Clark. He held up the gun. "Look, Terrance. You could see to shave in that mounting now."

"Beautiful," said Terrible Terrance. "Simply beautiful. But no matter how much you polish them, those pea-shooters will never replace my wonderful makeet."

"That's machete," said Pappy Clark, "and it wouldn't be worth one red hair from a beaver's tail agin a .64 ball out of this iron."

"I'll match my makeet against your antiquated arsenal from here to Colter's Hell," growled Terrible Terrance, slapping the leather-bound hilt of the huge Mexican knife thrust into his belt.

"Antiquated!" bristled Pappy Clark. "I'll have you know there ain't a piece of ordnance packed that can—"

"Maybe you didn't hear me," said Fannin. "I said we were going to work this morning. Saddle up that moving mountain you call a horse, O'Riley."

"Did you hear what he called Ballymacooly, Pappy?" said O'Riley, in an injured tone. "A moving mountain. The descendant of such peerless horses as Lair o' Lud sired on the River Clyde, he calls a mountain."

Fannin saw their animosity plainly, now, and what they were doing. It began to swell in him, way down deep. He could feel the pulse begin to beat harder across his temple. He closed his fingers slowly, the movement sending small ripples of tensile muscle up his forearm beneath the fine white skin.

"O'Riley," he said thinly. "Don't make me mad. I'm not a good man in my rage. I want you to get your horses now and come with me."

"Listen to the malrach," said O'Riley. "Not a good man in his rage. Aye, another sip, Ballymacooly? What do you know of rage, Mister Fannin? It takes an Irishman. Speak a little more of work and I'll show you what rage is."

Fannin's nails were biting into his palm now. The muscles across his forearm stood out like cables. Why was it always this way, when he was crossed? The death of him? He'd been told that more than once. He didn't doubt it. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of that strange haze clouding his mind. How could anger possess you so? Even a violent man like himself.

"O'Riley—"

"And now that you've wetted your whistle, Ballymacooly, would you object to me taking a—"

The shattering jug cut off O'Riley's voice, more than Fannin's movement. Fannin had leapt to him with one hand out to sweep the jug against the bars of the corral, pivoting on one foot at the same time to leave the other one free for the kick. O'Riley still had a grip on the jug as it swung around and smashed against the fence, and its impetus swung him off-balance enough to be thrown completely from his feet when Fannin kicked one leg from beneath him. Then Fannin was standing over the man, astraddle him, without any consciousness of how he got there, shaking with rage so violently he could hardly speak.

"Leave those smooth-bores right in your belt, Pappy," he said, in a thick, strangled voice, without looking around, "and come out where I can see you, unless you want me to stamp O'Riley's face into so much hamburger his own mother couldn't recognize it."

Even in that rage, Fannin's judgment of their affinity had not been wrong, and in a moment, Pappy Clark had moved around in front, his hand still gripping the handle of the top pistol in the belt, a strange, surprised blankness on his weazened face. O'Riley made an abortive effort to rise, but Fannin's hand shot down to grip the front of that odorous fur coat.

"If you're getting up to throw gear on that oversize stumpsucker you call a horse, all right," he said, in guttural voice, "but if you're getting up for anything else, O'Riley, I swear I'll kill you before you get your feet beneath you!"

O'Riley heaved up violently, a curse erupting from him, but Pappy jumped forward to catch his shoulder, still looking in that blank awe at Fannin.

"Don't, Terrance," he said. "He really means it. He'll kill you."

THE BALSAM poplars were blooming early this year, their red blossoms dropping off to fill stagnant pools of water left in gullies by the rain, the olive-yellow leaves filling the air with a sweet, resinous scent. Webb Fannin's anger always left him in a moody depression after it was gone, and he slumped somberly on his tall white mare as it stepped along the soggy ground of an upslope. Pappy Clark and Terrible Terrance had followed him for an hour northward from the bunkshack of Xaymaca, crossing the rich graze above Lodgepole Creek, none of them speaking. Now he sensed Pappy edging up behind him as they neared the summit of the hill.

"I've seen animals git that mad," said the old man. "Never a man. What is it?"

Fannin shrugged morosely. "Something in me. It's been that way all my life. When I get crossed it sets me off. It's like I get drunk. I've spent an hour tearing up a place and after it's over I couldn't remember a thing."

"You take your whisky straight?"

"Why chase it?" muttered Fannin.

The old man studied the nervous toss of the white mare's head. "And I'll bet not many men could sit that horse."

"No man but me," said Fannin. "It's been tried."

Pappy grinned. "Nothing wrong with you, son. You just take your life like you do your drink. Straight and quick and hard. I've known men like that before. They don't last long but they leave a helluva purty trail while they're riding."

They had reached the crest and stopped to rest their horses, and Fannin sat surveying the country ahead, nodding finally at a dim road winding through the shallow valley. "Fetterman cut-off runs through Jamaica's land."

"That's right," said Pappy. "The wagon trains used to take the cut-off between Fort Laramie and Fort Fetterman to avoid that hard drive through North Platte Canyon. Denning gave them permission to go on using it when he got the old DY. I don't know what arrangements Jamaica's made. Not as many wagons coming through as used to. You can see that notch through the Laramies from here. It's Eagle's Nest Gap. The road runs through there, and Jamaica's land ends just the other side."

"That's the only route north through the mountains between Cheyenne and the Platte, now," said Fannin.

"There's other routes, but not much heavy freight could be shipped over them," said Pappy. "What are you driving at?"

Fannin eased himself off to one side in the saddle, staring meditatively at the Laramies, without actually seeing them. "Jamaica thought there was something more than just a need for more graze that made the LCA interested in the old DY spread."

"What's the Fetterman cut-off got to do with it?" said Pappy.

Fannin ran his tongue across his upper lip. "There's something happening up in the Black Hills. The Seventh Cavalry has been moved into Fort Lincoln. That looks like they expect trouble with Crazy Horse."

"You're getting in deeper snow all the time," said Pappy.

Fannin shrugged. "I don't know. I've got it in my head that this is connected with the cut-off, somehow, and the cut-off's mixed up in what's brewing up north. Let's get to work. I'll ride this ridge toward the road and shove whatever stuff I find down towards water. You take the next hogback, Pappy. Terrance, head for Lodgepole where it cuts around the foot of these ridges and lay out a holding ground. You'll need a fire for branding—"

"I won't need anything," growled O'Riley.

Fannin swung toward him. "I thought we'd settled that."

"Terrance," Pappy said, swinging his Apaloosa jackass into the huge Irishman. "Don't rile him again now."

"We didn't settle anything, Fannin," said O'Riley, bending forward on his gigantic hunter, "but I think maybe we should—"

"Now listen, Terrance," said Pappy swiftly, "there ain't no use in this. Fannin's right about the cattle. They have to be tended. You done just about everything else under the sun for a living. You can learn to slap hot iron on a cow without much trouble."

O'Riley stared a moment longer at Fan-

nin with his drink-fogged, bloodshot eyes. Then, sullenly, he turned the great horse around and headed downslope toward the Lodgepole. Somehow, there was nothing in it that constituted a defeat.

"A lot of man there, boy," said Pappy Clark. "You're going to have to meet him again, sooner or later. I'd hate to have to bet on who'd come out alive."

"Any time," muttered Fannin, wheeling his fiddling mare in a tight, angry circle and trotting her off down the rocky crest of the hill. In a few moments he spotted a bunch of cattle grazing in a hollow on the north slope, and dropped down through slippery shale that spooked his animal, into the high bluegrass. He cut out three calves with their mothers, and a long yearling, missed in last year's round-up. He hazed them through the meadow parallel to the ridge, spotting another cut of heifers in a lower meadow. From this he cut two more yearlings. It took him several hours to collect all the unmarked stuff in this valley, and by the time he had reached the end of the ridge where it lowered into the Lodgepole bottoms, he was dusty and tired. Terrance had built a fire on a broad stretch of open meadow near the water, and had three irons with Jamaica's new Circle X brand heating in the fire. Pappy Clark came hazing in his bunch behind Fannin.

"You ever use a dally?" Fannin shouted at him, over the bawl of cattle.

"Down in Texas when I was a button," the old man answered. "This Apaloosa jackass ain't no good for close work though. You cut 'n haze. I'll ride circle."

Shrugging, Fannin unlashed the rope he had gotten from the bunkshack. He cut out a brindle and ran it toward the fire, forefooting the animal. The mare dropped back on her haunches and Fannin held his dally around the horn, waiting for O'Riley to get out with the tie-downs. The big Irishman stood there with his hands on his hips, watching.

"You got those peales I gave you," Fannin shouted at him, jerking the mare to one side to tauten the rope again as the brindle struggled on the ground. "Get out there and tie him down."

O'RILEY picked up a short length of hemp and lumbered toward the animal. He maneuvered to get in, but she lashed out wildly with her hind feet, and he jumped backward, cursing. He tried again, this time barely avoiding a kick on the hip. Finally, with a curse, Fannin swung off his mare and ran toward the man, ripping the tie-down from his hand and shoving him backward. He turned to throw himself on the brindle's hip before it could fight free of the mare's maneuvering to keep that rope taut, but before he could reach the animal, O'Riley had caught him from behind.

"I think you got the wrong idea about how a ramrod handles his crew," shouted the Irishman, shifting to strike Fannin. "You put your hands on me for the last time."

Fannin tried to drop the rope and dodge the blow at the same time, but he was taken off-balance. The blow caught him in the heart over his ribs. The shock of it was so great he had no sensation of motion. He found himself back down on the cow. His whole right side felt as if it had been crushed.

The mare had been maneuvering brilliantly to keep the dally taut and that cow on the ground, and the animal beneath Fannin was bawling and kicking wildly. Drawing in air with an agonized wheeze, he tried to fight free of those flailing hooves. O'Riley threw himself on Fannin before he could get away. Fannin put up a knee and heard the Irishman's shout of pain as he came down on it, and then the two of them were writhing and rolling back and forth on the frenzied cow.

"Terrance, Terrance," Fannin heard Pappy shouting from somewhere, "I told you, stop it! Stop it, Fannin! I don't want to see you kill each other. There's no sense in it. . . ."

Fannin rolled O'Riley partly off him, giving the man a short vicious jab full in the face, and from there he could see that Pappy had ridden in to jump off his spotted jackass and was tearing at O'Riley, trying to pull him off Fannin.

"Terrance, Terrance, please—ahhhh—"

Fannin saw it, and O'Riley must have too, because the Irishman quit struggling about the same time Fannin did. The flailing hind hoof of the cow had caught Pappy Clark in his stomach, and his shout had ended in that sick gasp as he went over backward, to lie face down on the ground, motionless.

"Pappy!" shouted Terrance, in a broken voice, and fought free of Fannin to whirl, stumbling toward the old man. Fannin rolled away from the cow, head beneath his arms, and got to his feet, groaning with the pain of his side. The brindle finally managed to roll over and get enough slack in that rope to shake it free of her forefoot, scrambling erect with a shrill bellow which Fannin hardly heard. He was crouched over Pappy Clark too, now. O'Riley had turned the old man over. Pappy's face was dead white, and he reached up one hand to clutch at the Irishman.

"That did it, Terrance. I'm on that last hoss now; I'm goin' over the ridge—"

"No, Pappy," pleaded the Irishman, shaking him. "Don't say that."

"Yes, Terrance, yes. But afore we throw the last squaw-hitch on, I got something I wanta tell you."

"Pappy, you old gombeen, they ain't going to sing your Masses for a hundred years yet. All you got is a kick in the belly—"

"No, no—" Pappy moaned, waving his hand, "this time my saddle's cooled permanent. But before we take it off the hoss for good, I got something I want to say."

"Pappy—"

"Let him talk," Fannin snapped.

"He carries on like this every time he stubs his toe," O'Riley growled. "He ain't hurt and he knows it. Just a little kick—"

"No, Terrance, no," groaned Pappy. "This time I'm curled up for good. But before we blow out the lantern, there's something—there's something—" He trailed off, and Fannin realized he was looking past them. Suddenly the old man sat up. "We better pull out our picket pins. I think they mean business."

IT WAS the sound which whirled Fannin away from Pappy Clark, even before the old man had finished. There were half a dozen riders coming down off the ridge, firing their guns in a wild volley that startled the cattle. A big dun heifer bawled and took off across the meadow, followed by her calf, and the stampede was started. The leading riders quirted their galloping horses right on into the tail of the herd, yelling and shouting. Fannin was on his feet now, running toward his white mare. The frightened horse wheeled away from him, dally rope still trailing from the saddle horn.

"Croppy," yelled Fannin angrily. "Come back here. Croppy—"

The mare hesitated, but a rider cut around behind the cattle and came at Fannin in a dead run, shooting toward the mare, and she pivoted and broke into a wild gallop in the same direction as the cattle. Working the cattle would have been awkward with his gun in the middle of his belt that way, and Fannin had buckled on a holster. He clapped his hand to the tag butt of his gun and yanked it out, setting himself for a shot at the rider. By now he was so mad his hand was shaking, and he squeezed the trigger with a bitter curse. The horseback wheeled away, a wild slug from his saddle gun biting the soft turf to one side of Fannin. Shouting curses, Fannin emptied his gun after the man. Another pair of horsemen appeared from the rising dust farther to the left, quartering in toward Fannin from there. Pappy Clark's Apaloosa had bolted, and he came running toward Fannin, one of his long French pistols smoking.

"Get into the timber," he shouted, catching at Fannin's shoulder. "We can't fight them off in the open like this."

"The hell with it," roared Fannin, tearing loose from him. "They can't do this to us. They can't just come down here and do this—"

"You'll get filled with lead," screamed the little old man, stuffing the pistol away to grab him with both hands and drag him backward. "You so crazy you don't know when to back up, sonny? I never saw anything like that. Man or beast I never saw it. Even a grizzly bear knows when to run. Come on, now. Come on!"

Yelling at him, fighting with him, Pappy finally managed to pull Fannin into the timber, which they stumbled through to the Lodgepole. O'Riley was already there, crouched down behind the steep cutbank, his beloved machete in one hand. Fannin dropped down beside him in the mud, water sopping in over his cavalry boots, fumbling blindly to jack the empty shells from his .44.

"Look at that," marveled Pappy Clark, sliding down beside them. "So mad he's crying. Did you ever see a sight like him, Terrance?"

O'Riley spat contemptuously. Fannin got his gun reloaded finally, and lay there against the soggy, rancid mud of the cut-

bank, staring through the trees at the last of the stampeding cattle as they disappeared into the timber on either slope of the valley where it opened out into the bottoms here. The horsemen wheeled back and forth a few times, and farther off, Pappy Clark's Apaloosa jackass brayed from some alders. Then the riders pulled together and filed back up toward the ridge. For a moment, another ridden horse was silhouetted higher up, where it must have been waiting. Pappy Clark stiffened beside Fannin, squinting up at this. Finally he shook his head.

"No. No. These old eyes must be giving out on me. It can't be him."

Fannin's head turned toward him sharply. "Who?"

CHAPTER THREE

Fracas in Cheyenne

THE dim huff of a backing engine and the clang of workmen overhauling a boiler in the U. P. yards came dimly through the alley and mingled with the creak of freight wagons and a dim thump of a trotting horse heading up Sixteenth street toward the center of Cheyenne. The gaudy facade of the Spanishtown faced south on Sixteenth, and Victor Castine stood across the street from the saloon, looking at the upstairs windows on the right side, knowing a keen hope that Jamaica would be in.

It was strange, he reflected, almost ludicrous, the way something could suddenly come to mean so much to a man, a man who had found it so impossible, always, to find significance in anything. And he was that type, even in appearance. His black hair was straight and like an Indian's, above a long, narrow, pale face, the thick blue lids of his eyes so heavy it appeared he was half asleep most of the time. The careful knot of his silk cravat, the peerless hang of the tails on his cutaway and the impeccable tailoring of his dark broadcloth trousers gave the impression of studied conventionality in all the non-essentials. He had not heard the man come up behind him, but he evinced no reaction to the voice.

"How're the cards treating you, Victor?"

Castine turned unhurriedly to the portly, distinguished man who must have just come down from his offices above. "Good morning, Doctor Edwards. I'm pulling aces out all along. The Big Dollar raked in more last week than any other two saloons in Laramie."

"I understand your Cheyenne Club is doing remarkably well here, too," said Edwards. He thrust his comfortable paunch out to chuckle softly, running one pink hand up and down the heavy gold watch chain across his Marseille waistcoat. "Won't that sort of threaten your friendship with Jamaica?"

"Not at all. Competition being the life, you know. Fact of the matter is, I was just going in to see her. Perhaps you'll join me in a drink."

"Never refuse," smiled Edwards, pulling his inevitable battered Panama down more securely over his mane of snow-white hair as he moved to the curb, putting all his weight on the cane and dropping his stiff leg into the street first. Castine knew the old man's pride, and had made the mistake of offering him a hand before. Now he simply fitted his gait to Edwards' as they moved across.

Castine heard the horse coming before he saw it. The thud of galloping hoofs rose over the creaking of a nearing wagon and the call of the teamster to his mules. Then the tall white mare careened into view down Sixteenth. The huge red-headed man riding the animal sat a buffalo-seated Crow saddle with a silver-plated Mexican tree and a horn as big as a dinner plate. Long-fringed, gaily-beaded saddle bags flapped against the horse's flanks; the Spanish bridle dripped silver pendants.

"We better get across," Doctor Edwards said. "He's coming around this side of the wagon and he doesn't see us."

Castine started to follow him, then saw that the horseman had turned the other way around the high-piled Murphy freighter and was going to come out on the opposite side.

"Doc," he called, "Doc, don't step out there. He's coming around."

Edwards hesitated at the corner of the wagon, turning back. At that moment, the white mare burst into view. Castine had taken the step which put him within reach of the doctor, and he caught the elderly man's arm, jerking him back. The mare's chest struck Edwards, knocking him back into Castine. He could have kept the

doctor from going down, but the horseman, seeing them, had already pulled back hard on the mare in a tardy effort to try and keep from striking Edwards. The mare reared up wildly, wheeling to the right. That carried its rump into the off leader of the wagon's mule team. The mare whinnied excitedly and lashed out with a hind foot, and the mules began braying and fighting their traces.

"Haw, there, you crazy knotheads," shouted the driver, "haw, whoa, haw—"

In order to get clear of the mules, the horsebacker had to wheel his horse back toward Castine and the doctor. With the sight of that lathered chest and frothing muzzle rearing above them, Castine twisted himself around in front of Edwards. He shouted in pain as the animal came down, one sharp hoof striking his back, and then he had thrown himself and Edwards to the street, rolling from beneath the mare and pulling the doctor with him. He heard the teamster still bellowing at his mules, and the snorts and whinnies of the mare as the animal wheeled toward the other side of the street once more, and he realized they were free.

A crowd had gathered on the sidewalk, and getting to his feet, Castine could see the rider had finally quieted his mare. It was standing on the other side, fretting and fiddle-footing.

"Damn' fool," said Edwards, rubbing his bad leg. "Ought to know better than to race through town like that. You all right, Victor?"

Castine nodded, without answering, and brushing himself off carefully, moved across the street toward the rider. He had always been a man of slow, deep emotions, but he was surprised at how little anger, or even irritation he felt at this. He stopped before the man, still sitting his horse, and looked up at him.

"Perhaps you'd like to get down and apologize to Doctor Edwards," he said.

A sullen defiance crossed the big red-headed man's face, and a jerky movement of his hands on the reins caused the mare to start dancing backward. "I don't make apologies. Right or wrong, the thing's done. What's the use of talking about it?"

"The philosophy of an expedient man," said Castine, and saw the puzzlement that drew from the rider. He let his eyes pass over the bunched, quivering musculature of the horse, like fat snakes writhing across shoulders and chest beneath the thin, wet white skin. "You have rather an excitable animal there. It must take some of a rider to control her."

"Nobody but me," said the man.

"Oh," said Castine, "can you control her?"

THE horsebacker's great chest swelled with his sudden inhalation, and he swung off the animal in a swift, vicious way, throwing the reins over the hitchrack in front of the Spanishtown and pulling them through a pair of half-hitches in a hard tug. The whole motion had taken but a moment, and he whirled back to face Castine, not much taller than the gambler, but at least fifty pounds heavier.

"You've changed your mind about apologizing?" said Castine.

"I never change my mind about anything," said the redhead through his teeth.

"Then why did you get off?" said Castine.

He had never seen the effects of anger grow so palpably in a man. Little muscles began to twitch about the red-headed giants' mouth and the diffused blood crept across the lithic planes of his cheek like a dark tide. His thick, spatulated fingers were closing in a slow, almost involuntary way against his palms, as if he had no control over their action.

"If you have business elsewhere today," he said, in a thick, strained voice, "I suggest you go about it."

Castine's opaque black eyes met the other's gaze in a cool, objective appraisal. "You take a strange attitude, for a man who has just caused so much trouble."

The redhead made a guttural, inarticulate sound, and one of his great hands moved upward with a spasmodic jerk.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen." It was Edwards' voice, coming from behind them. "There is no need for animosity. It was just an accident. My fault as much as anyone's. An old man can't move as fast as you young buttons. Especially with this—" With a deprecating laugh, he tapped his leg with the cane. "Let's go in and cool ourselves off with a drink. I'm sure we could all use it. Castine?"

Castine let his eyes hold that flashing,

bloodshot gaze a moment longer, then shrugged, turning to help Edward up on the curb. The interior of the Spanishtown was equal to its gaudy reputation. The bar ran the length of one side, its gleaming Honduras mahogany backed by an ornate mirror decorated with Acanthus scrolls and fretwork in delicately wrought gesso. A Negro was on a tall stepladder in the middle of the saloon, replacing burned-down candles in one of the three cut-glass chandeliers depending from the high-arched ceiling. A trio of croupiers stood at a keno layout, smoking and talking, and a few men stood at the bar.

"Step up, everybody," roared the redheaded man, coming in behind Castine and slamming his great hammy hand down on the bar. "What's your poison? Webb Fannin's in town and he's standing a round."

He took a double jigger of bar whiskey without a chaser and tossed it off in one neat gulp. Doctor Edwards watched him, smiling faintly.

"Webb Fannin," he said, in that soft, ironical voice of his. "I suppose I should have known. They said you did that a hundred times up in Deadwood and walked out under your own power."

Fannin shrugged. "It was only eighty-two. And they weren't double jiggers." He turned toward them, his defiant gaze taking in Castine. "I could do it a hundred, though."

"I don't doubt it," said Edwards. "But it has always seemed to me one loses the true value of drink, downing it that way. Now you take the Creole Lady. Have you got it, Xago?" One of the Negroes Jamaica had imported from her island to staff the Spanishtown had been collecting ingredients, and he set them down before the doctor. Castine had seen the ceremony a hundred times, but he watched with the undying interest of a connoisseur as Edwards began. "Now we start with the Maraschino. A rare liquor obtained from the special Dalmation Marasca cherry. A fourth of a jigger. Then the bourbon. Three-quarters of a jigger. So. And finally, the Madeira. Here we have a three-fold sensory appeal. Hold it up to the light. See? What a brilliant, sparkling color. And the bouquet. What flower holds so sweet a scent? Shakespeare knew it. 'Jack, how agrees the Devil and thee about thy soul, that thou soldest him on Good Friday last, for a cup of Madeira and a gold capon's leg.' " He shook the mixture, straining it into the glass, turning toward Fannin. "Now, how much more intense the enjoment, having contemplated its beauties before tasting them. Don't you agree?"

Fannin stared at Edwards, that puzzlement in his face. "No," he said, abruptly. "Maybe it depends on the man, Doctor." He turned and left them, moving to the back of the saloon, where a stairway led to the balcony above, which ran the whole length of the bar, with doors opening off it into private rooms on the second floor. Edwards lowered his glass, watching the tall, broad-shouldered figure swagger away.

. "A flamboyant personality," he said, with a small, rueful laugh.

"A braggart and a boor," Castine muttered.

"Don't underestimate him, Victor." The doctor turned back to the bar, studying his drink. "Not an ordinary braggart. Most men of that type sound off through some sense of inferiority, which they try to compensate for by continually striving to convince other men of their superiority. Somehow—" he twirled the glass meditatively, "somehow, I don't think that is the case with Fannin."

Castine watched the redhead move down the hall with mounting concern. "Looks like he's headed for Jamaica's."

"He's riding for her, didn't you hear?" said the doctor.

"Riding for her?" Castine put his drink down, turning from the bar.

Edwards caught at his arm. "Victor, I wouldn't go up there while he's with her."

"On the contrary," said Castine. "That's exactly why I do want to go up there."

JAMAICA'S apartment stood at the front end of the balcony, with windows overlooking Sixteenth Street below. The door was closed, and Castine had just lifted one pale, blue-knuckled hand to knock, when he heard the voices from within. The first was Fannin's deep rumble.

"I'm going to need more crew than those two old jackasses you keep, Jamaica. Maybe they're all right for fighting the LCA, but they aren't worth a Confederate dollar when it comes to working the cattle."

"All right, Webb, you can do whatever

you want about men. Is there anything else?"

"Your hair."

"What about my hair, Webb?"

"It smells so sweet—"

"Webb, I told you that was no good. Maybe you never met a woman before who didn't react. You've met one now."

"You can't mean that, Jamaica. We're too much alike. You're as wild as I am and you know it. It will take a lot of man to tame you. I'm a lot of man. I'm more man than ever handled you, Jamaica, and you can't stop me. I'll keep trying till—"

"Don't touch me, Webb."

"I can't keep from it, Jamaica."

"Then perhaps I can keep you from it," said Castine, opening the door.

They stood by the rich folds of wine portiers covering the windows overlooking Sixteenth, and they both turned to him in surprise. Jamaica's black hair was done up in a Clarissa coiffure, arranged in a large bow at the back of the neck and covered with a net, her bare shoulders gleaming in alabaster contrast to the dark blue velvet of her low-cut gown. Something so keen and poignant went through Castine he did not want to spoil it with speech. His awareness of Fannin disappeared for a moment, until the man spoke.

"You manage to include yourself in everything, don't you?"

Castine turned toward the great redhead, feeling his right brow lift in that faintly quizzical way. "And you manage to play the boor in everything, don't you?" he said.

Fannin's fingers began to open and close. "Castine, don't cross me again—not here. I don't want to have to do anything, but if you keep this up, I won't be able to help myself. I'm that way, and I won't be able to help it."

It struck Castine as so strange, that with the poignant reaction to Jamaica so recent, he could feel nothing here, no anger, not the slightest irritation, nothing. In a way, he wished he could form an anger. For the first time in his life he wanted to know anger with a man.

"I don't think you can be so devastating in your rage, Fannin, as you try to give the impression of being," he said finally.

"By God, Castine—"

"Fannin!"

It was the woman's voice, this last, and it halted whatever Fannin had meant to do like a brick wall thrown in front of him. He stood there where he had taken a violent step toward Castine, his whole, great body trembling, the blood filling his face purple, a vein as big as Castine's thumb pounding across his temple.

"I think you had better leave," Jamaica told him.

A small, guttural sound seemed forced from Fannin, and he turned part way toward her, fists clenched with such force that the cords in his wrists seemed ready to burst the skin. He held out one hand, but he had not started to speak when the sounds began to seep in from outside, and over the growing hubbub, a man's shout.

"Gold! Gold in the Black Hills! There's been a strike in the Dakotas! Gold in the Black Hills!"

Castine could not count the expressions passing across Fannin's face. Anger struggled to remain, but it was dissipated by a strange, dawning cognition, as if something he had been questioning before were suddenly answered, and after that, a twisted urgency.

"I'll be back, Castine," he said, his body gathering itself to move. "I'll want to see you, then," and he did move, passing Castine and plunging through the door with a violent, animal grace, the balcony shuddering to his long legged-run toward the stairs. Jamaica turned toward the gambler, her brow drawn together in a plea.

"Castine, you did that deliberately. You shouldn't—he is bad in his rage; he's capable of inconceivable things—"

"And I have the impression, somehow, that not much else in the world has ever stopped him the way you did, then," said Castine. He moved toward her, meaning to go on, meaning to tell her that he could understand that in a man; could very easily understand how she could hold a power over a man that way, but then he realized how she was still looking beyond him after Fannin, and something cold closed around the rising tide of emotion. It was the first time he had ever felt capable of fully expressing what he felt for her; he wondered if it would ever come again. It was gone now, and he moved mechanically to the window, staring out.

"Gold in the Black Hills. That will certainly start things moving," he said, and

then turned to glance obliquely at her. "Why do you tolerate such a man?"

"I need such a man," she said. "He's worth an army in this fight." A pensive smile moved her lips slightly. "And maybe it isn't tolerance, anyway."

He had been watching the shouting, excited crowd on the street, but he turned toward her, still holding the curtain aside. "You can't—"

"Why not?" The smile was gone, and her bare shoulders shrugged in an obscure defiance. "I've never known another man like him, Victor. Braggart. Bully. Rough, crude, swearing boor, he still holds a fascination for me I can't deny. I tried to fight it at first. I'm still trying to, Victor. But there's something. . . ." She trailed off, making a vague motion with her hand. . . . "I don't know. The magnetism, maybe. Like some animal. The way he moves. The way he lives. A woman can't help being attracted to that, even though she knows what a mistake it is. Funny, too, it was so unlike him to leave that way. I wonder why?"

Victor had turned to stare out on the street again, and his voice was almost toneless. "Perhaps it struck him, what this gold strike in the Black Hills could mean to the Fetterman cut-off."

He felt the sudden doubt in her voice. "Victor, what do you mean?"

CHAPTER FOUR

One More Life for Pappy

FROM time immemorial, the Indians had made their tobacco from the kinnikinick which lay tucked in the crevices and sun-warmed pockets of the slopes that overlooked the steep cut of Eagle's Nest Gap. Webb Fannin had dismounted in a gully protected from the wind, just below the ridge, but this did not prevent small gusts of vagrant draft from fretting his nervous mare. There was no timber to hitch her up, and he had held the reins for the past hour, hunkered there, his eyes slitted in a wind-burned face. It was two days since he had left Cheyenne. They had taken turns watching up here, he and the Irishman and Pappy Clark.

He whirled about abruptly, slapping at his holstered Pond, and then stopped his motion, the word escaping him in gusty surprise. "Jamaica!"

The woman came on down through the shale in which she had made the first sound, slipping a bit, finally dropping into the coulee. "Pappy Clark told me you were doing something up here. After the way you acted in the Spanishtown the other day, I thought I'd better look into it. What are you waiting for?"

"Get your horse down off the rim," he said, standing to grab her bridle reins. When he had tugged the animal in so it would not be skylighted, he turned toward her, "I think that strike in the Black Hills is going to move things fast down here now, and when the lid blows off I'll bet you a boogered bronc to a muley cow it happens right here."

"Victor said something like that," she told him. "What has this gold strike to do with me and with the cut-off here? Is that why you left so suddenly the other day?"

"You thought from the beginning the ruckus the LCA was causing went deeper than mere cattle trouble," he said. "If there's gold in the Black Hills it will have to be shipped out. Cheyenne is the nearest railhead. The Fetterman cut-off is the only trail capable of handling freight through the Laramies into this section. Your own land controls Eagle's Nest Gap, one of the key points on the cut-off. Add it up."

She stood there a moment rubbing one hand up and down the squaw-tanned buckskin of her riding habit, staring at him. "You mean that's what the Laramie Cattle Association's been driving at?"

"Doesn't it look that way? They were the only other party attempting to get the old DY from the courts. When they couldn't buy it from you, they tried to discourage you by ruining your herds. Maybe they would have been content to try that method over a longer period of time, but I have a hunch the strike breaking right now will stop that. Shipments will be starting soon, and whatever moves they make will have to work faster than trying to get you out by ruining your herds."

"What possible interest could a group of cattlemen have in a thing like that?" she said. "How could it matter to them who controlled Eagle's Nest Gap?"

"No interest," he said. "Unless they want to stop the shipments."

"Why should they want to stop it?" she scoffed.

"That's one tree we haven't laced up," he said. "I've considered the possibility that the Laramie Cattle Association isn't the only party involved. They're the strongest force south of the Laramies. Maybe someone is using their strength. Whose name was on the application for purchase the courts got from the LCA?"

"Garrison Ward," she answered. "He had power of attorney for the Laramie Cattle Association."

"Does he work for anybody else besides the LCA?"

She shrugged. "He has law offices in both Cheyenne and Laramie. Most of the big operators in both towns are his clients. Myself, Doctor Edwards, Kaycee Grant, Victor—"

Fannin's eyes narrowed. "What does Castine do?"

"Oh, there you go again," she flamed. "Victor Castine is just an old friend. He helped me a lot when I first came here from the island. He's a professional gambler and we're thrown together a lot in our business—" she stopped abruptly, biting her lip. "I don't know why I should bother explaining anything to you," she said sullenly.

He started to answer when he realized her gaze had gone beyond him, over the rim of the coulee. He saw it when he turned, down in Eagle's Nest Gap, the faint, small movement, resolving itself into four horsemen. They halted beneath the high, gray, eroded cliffs rising from the narrow floor of the pass, and one man dismounted turning to get something from his saddle bags. A second rider trotted on up to the crest of the pass where he could overlook the road rising to this spot. A third man turned his animal up the slope beneath the coulee in which Fannin stood, working through the warped, twisted cedars.

"That hickory shirt," whispered Jamaica. "Owlie French!"

Without speaking, Fannin turned to put the reins over his white mare's head. The woman started to get her reins, but he caught her hand.

"You can't go down there!" he snapped.

A look of pain crossed her face, and she tried to pull away. "I'm not staying here."

"Don't be foolish. Can't you see what they're doing? That man's digging holes for dynamite at the foot of the cliff."

"Fannin, you're breaking my hand," she gasped, and when he had eased the grip, she turned her flushed face up to his. "If you go, I go."

He grabbed her other hand, speaking in a vicious burst of anger. "I tell you you're staying here."

She struggled wildly in his grip, gasping in pain, and her free hand shot up to his face. He reared back with the flashing agony of her nails ripping his cheek, stifling a shout. But he had not released her other hand, and with that terrible rage blinding him, he drew back his free fist.

"Fannin!"

SHE had stopped fighting entirely, and her voice came with a cold, bitter intensity that bit through his roaring anger like a Bowie through hot butter. It was like that time back in her parlor in Cheyenne, with Castine. He realized, for the first time, how his fist was held back of his head that way, and stared at it stupidly. She stood rigid in his grasp, her gaze wide on his face. Finally his clouded eyes met hers.

"You're pretty terrible in your rage, aren't you?" she said, between her teeth.

A ragged, gusty breath escaped him, and he dropped the hand. "You're the only one who could ever stop me, Jamaica."

"Maybe you were right, Fannin," she said. "Maybe we are both alike, in a way. Whatever we feel is so intense and violent. It would take a lot of woman to satisfy you."

"Listen," he pleaded, grasping her shoulders. "We can't do this alone. You've got to ride for Terrible Terrance and Pappy Clark. They're at the Little Juniper line camp."

"You're just doing this to get me out—"

"No!" His hands tightened. "Jamaica, you've got to do it, we can't stall around like this any longer."

"Fannin—"

Her face twisted, strained up at him. Then she wheeled out of his grasp and climbed on her animal. He waited till she was out of the coulee, then mounted his own white mare and heeled it onto the slope. He took one look back to see her silhouetted on the ridge, watching him. With a gnawing hope that what he had told her was strong enough to keep her out of this, he booted the fiddling mare into a gallop downslope. He passed through a nar-

row stand of silver-barked alpine fir, his horse's rump and shoulders slapping the slender trunks and leaving them atremble to drop a feathery shower of indigo-blue blossoms behind him. Then he reached the first meadow, too large to skirt, and as he broke into the open, Owlie French, still working up from below, came from the fringe of cedars on the other side. The man pulled his horse up sharply, staring in surprise, and then wheeled with a shout.

"Jack," he called, running his horse back into the cedars, his voice echoing against the far cliff, "it's Fannin. Webb Fannin's here—watch it—"

Fannin ground his heels into the mare's flanks and she broke from the gallop into a headlong dash through the lush wheatgrass of the meadow, crashing into the cedars after the other man. Maybe Owlie didn't have the same confidence in his horse as Fannin had, or maybe he just lacked the guts to run at top speed through the close-growing timber, because Fannin sighted him ahead, and saw he was rapidly closing the distance between them.

They were about twenty feet apart when he drew abreast of Owlie. The man already had his gun out and was firing at Fannin, but he was still going downslope in that half-hearted gallop, unwilling or unable to cut his horse loose completely, and it spoiled whatever precision his shots might have had. It would have been inconvenient to pack that Pond front-loader through his belt during the cow work, and Fannin had been carrying it in a saddle boot. He unskinned the weapon, and knowing what a mistake it would be to try for the man, he opened fire on the horse. On his second shot, he saw Owlie's animal rear into the air with a shrill scream. Owlie kicked free of the stirrups and stepped off to roll over and over down the slope till he came up against a tree trunk.

Fannin lost sight of him, bursting free of the trees into a strip of bunchgrass. He did not realize there was a cut here, dropping into the road, till he was directly upon it, and then it was too late to stop his mare. He gave her a full, free bit, and the rest was too fast for fear or thought or reaction. The horse left its lead and they were in the air over the road. Then they struck. The animal's superb balance almost saved them, but the drop was too much.

Fannin's feet were free of the oxbows. They had been going with such impetus that both he and the horse were carried clear across the road, and though he was no longer in the saddle, he struck the cliff on the other side in mid-air, at the same time the horse did. He slid down onto the kicking, whinneying animal, rolled free, sick with the pain in his shoulder.

LYING there against the gray, porous cliffs, his head swimming dizzily, Fannin could see California Jack, farther down the road where he had been working, now fighting to mount his wheeling horse, and another rider beyond him. The rider who had gone up the road the other way to stand guard at the crest was galloping back, shouting something. Then Fannin saw, behind the man, appearing over the topmost point of the road and silhouetted there a moment, a great roaring Irishman on a huge red hunter and a wizened little whanghide of a man on a jackass with Apaloosa spots spilled over its white rump like careless daubs of paint.

Fannin saw where he had dropped his gun, farther out in the road, and started crawling for it. He reached the weapon and got to his knees, lifting it up with great effort. The rider coming from the crest saw him there, and turned off the road. The cut was more shallow higher up toward the crest, and he was able to scramble the animal up into the meadow.

"I got the varmint, Terrance," shouted Pappy Clark, in a cracked voice. "You put your machete mark on Jackie Boy down there."

The old man's Apaloosa went up that cut-bank more like a monkey than a horse, and Terrible Terrance O'Riley pulled his hunter only far enough over to pass Fannin in the middle of the road, the ground shaking beneath Fannin's knees, as the huge animal thundered by. California Jack got his excited horse wheeled toward them for a moment, and his gun was out. Fannin heard it bark and saw Terrible Terrance jerked to one side in the saddle as if by a hand. The Irishman still sat upright, swaying precariously, fighting for his balance, but finally toppled off to roll into the cliff.

Fannin had gained his feet by then, and started stumbling down the road toward them. Jack seemed ready to face him, still

battling to keep his horse turned toward Fannin.

"It's going, Jack, it's going," shouted the other rider from behind Jack, and the man in the pinto vest whirled to look at the base of the cliff where the Irishman lay, and then wheeled his horse with a vicious jerk on the reins, and the two of them set off down the road away from Fannin at a headlong gallop.

Fannin saw it then, the thin blue spiral of smoke rising from the cliff base by O'Riley. "Terrance," he screamed, running toward the man, "get up! Get out! Can't you see what they've got there? Get up, man, get up—"

The Irishman made some dim, feeble movement, then flopped back on his belly. Fannin was still sick and dazed, and he tripped and went to his knees once in running toward the man. Finally he reached O'Riley, falling over the Irishman's great body to crawl upon the sinister hiss of smoke, beating at the stubs of fuses left in the protruding ends of the dynamite, finally throwing his whole body across them to smother the flame, gasping at the pain of the black powder burns against his belly.

Finally, he dragged himself back to Terrance, turning the man over, helping him to sit up. The Irishman had been hit in the shoulder and was bleeding from there. He shook his head, staring at the dynamite.

"Jamaica couldn't have reached you in this time," said Fannin.

"Jamaica?" muttered the Irishman dazedly. "We didn't see her. Pappy and me was coming to spell you on watch." He was still staring at the dynamite. "You knew it was there?"

"Spotted it from the ridge," said Fannin.

"And still you came after me," said O'Riley. "You had every chance of gettin' blown to Saint Patrick along with me."

"There's a chance in every game," said Fannin.

"I misjudged you, Fannin," said O'Riley, thrusting out his ponderous paw. "There aren't too many real men in the world. I'm ashamed I didn't recognize one when he first came along."

Fannin's grin cracked the caked dust on his face, and he took the hand. Sporadic firing broke out from the timber on the slope across the road, and O'Riley grabbed at the hilt of his machete.

"That's Pappy. By Angus, if those sons have hurt that little gombeen I'll draw and quarter every one from here to Laramie!"

Together they ran across the road, climbing the cutbank, panting up into the warped cedars. First they came upon the Apaloosa jackass, calmly gnawing at the bark of a tree, and O'Riley's face darkened with rage as he ran on by, shaking his machete viciously. Farther up they found Pappy, huddled up on the ground, swearing feebly.

"I tried to make that buzzard-headed, coon-footed sop-and-tater excuse for a spotted jackass go through the timber here and he balked on me and bucked me off. I think I busted my neck, Terrance. I think my lantern's blown out for good. But before we cinch up this last kak, there's somethin' I want to tell you—"

"Don't be so loco, you old shanachie," growled O'Riley, kneeling before him. "All you did was rip your leggins."

"No, no," moaned Pappy, reaching feebly for his hand. "There ain't no more beaver left in this creek for sure. But before we lace up the trapsack for good, there's somethin' I got to say—"

"Will you shut up," said the Irishman. "You got more spring riding left than I have."

"Let him talk, Terrance," said Fannin. "He really looks bad."

"The old bunch-quitter always carries on this way—"

"Not this time," moaned Pappy. "My bottle of beaver medicine's really empty this time, Terrance—" He cut off suddenly, as the crash of forced passage through underbrush came from the timber higher up, and the old man sat up abruptly, his voice growing sharp. "Owlie French. I was chasing him. Mought be he's still in there somewhere."

"I think I got his horse," said Fannin, and he unskinned his Pond as he rose, breaking into a heavy run through the trees. He could still hear the sound of forced brush, not as loud now. He reached the dense stand of timber he and Owlie had raced through, coming across Owlie's horse. The animal lay on its side, still alive, and for a moment, Fannin thought it might have been the animal making the noise in the brush. There were no bushes near, however, and no sign of movement in the lush grass about the animal. He knew

an impulse to put the animal out of its misery, realizing the shot would give him away, yet reluctant to allow its suffering any longer. He was still standing there in the momentary debate, when that crash of brush came again. Fannin turned sharply toward the chokecherry filling the timber on his flank. The horseman was coming through this and did not see Fannin till he was clear of the brush, and then pulled his animal up in surprise. Fannin felt the same emotion in his voice.

"Castine!" he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Tinhorn Bets on Bullets

MANY habits of the island still clung to her. She awoke at nine for a light breakfast of hot chocolate and toast with Jamaica honey; then about eleven, she had a second breakfast, which was the real meal of the day. She sat on the silken coverlet of her tester bed, studying the jewels in her box on the side table.

"Which do you think would go well with my blue moire, Ochorios?" she murmured. "The cabochon, or this coral choker?"

"The emerald, Miss Jamaica," murmured Ochorios softly, setting the silver breakfast tray down on the marble-topped table by the window. "Doctor Edwards is waiting."

"Send him up," said Jamaica irritably. She was still angry at Fannin for sending her out of it that way yesterday. He must have known Terrance and Pappy had already been on the way there. She shifted to watch herself in he cheval glass of the dressing table, fastening the choker.

"Allow me, Jamaica," said Doctor Edwards' soft voice, and she stiffened with surprise, feeling his hands at the back of her neck.

"I didn't hear you," she said.

"I didn't mean to startle you," said Edwards. "Ochorios told me to come in."

After he had fastened the necklace, she stood up, turning around to indicate one of the wing chairs by the marble-topped table. "I was just having breakfast. Perhaps you would join me."

"I've eaten," he said, glancing at the tree ferns filling her room. "I like that oxalis. I marvel at how you can keep them alive and so beautiful in this climate."

"They remind me of the island," she said. "Perhaps a drink?"

He took off his Panama, seating himself carefully in the chair, crossing his hands over the gold top of the cane. "I never refuse."

"Some burnt Jamaica, perhaps, with hot butter?" She turned to call Ochorios.

"What bizarre tastes you brought from that island," smiled Edwards, in soft amusement. "Burnt rum. That's almost sacrilege. I'd rather have a little bourbon and soda, if you could manage."

"Where is that man?" she muttered petulantly. "Ochorios!"

She lifted the silver top off one of the plates, and a smile came to Edwards' face again. "Bananas and yams. I suppose you have them shipped in on the U. P. every morning."

There was something about his smile that caught at her, and she studied him a moment with narrowed eyes, then turned to the sideboard. "I suppose I'll have to officiate myself. What's on your mind, Doctor?"

"Not too much soda, Jamaica," he murmured. "I hear you had another brush with the Laramie Cattle Association the other day up in Eagle's Nest."

She handed him the drink. "They were trying to blow the cliff across the road."

"Do you know how bourbon first came into existence, Jamaica?" asked Edwards, holding his glass to the light. "In 1791, the excise tax levied on whiskey became so excessive that disgruntled distillers moved farther west to escape it, finding the proper water for distillation in Southern Indiana and Kentucky. The first whiskey distilled here was in Bourbon County. The name bourbon has remained to this day as the designation of whiskey made from maize."

He took a careful sip, rolling it around in his mouth, nodding approvingly. "That would have closed the Fetterman off for some time, wouldn't it? With this gold starting to come down from the Black Hills, a new road would have had to be opened. Seems to me the topography up there would necessitate a new route heading for Laramie instead of Cheyenne."

She had started to eat the yams, but her dark head raised. "I always thought," she said finally, "that the subtlety of your discernment might extend to more than

just bourbon and soda, Doctor Edwards."

HE TOOK another sip, studying the the drink. "Has it ever occurred to you how immensely a town would be benefitted by those gold shipments? This is the closest railhead to the Black Hills, and the Fetterman cut-off is the only trail north from this section. We thought the railroad brought a boom. It will look sick beside the boom these gold seekers will bring. Not only will the gold coming down from Black Hills means hundreds of thousands of dollars to the shipping firms. There will be gold seekers by the thousands hitting here, using it as a jumping-off place, outfitting, getting supplies, stopping over. It will mean undreamed of prosperity for every kind of business, Jamaica."

Her breathing was not perceptible now as she watched him. "Go on."

"There has always been a feud between Laramie and Cheyenne, as you know," he said, "ever since those small veins of gold were found in the Laramie Mountains and Laramie threatened to eclipse Cheyenne as a town in the Territory. Naturally, if Cheyenne is the recipient of this new boom, it will put Laramie out in the dark. In each town, there is a small group who form the controling interests, of course. Here, it looked for a while as if the business men had the reins, but now, with your control of the cut-off, the gambling interests sit top saddle. And in Laramie—"

"Kaycee Grant and the Laramie Cattle Association," she finished.

"That's what it looks like, doesn't it?" he said. "The LCA is the strongest faction in that section, apparently. If they had been successful in ruining you by wiping out your herds, the way they tried, it might have put you in such a bad position that you would have made a deal with them about Eagle's Nest Gap. But look at it closer. Failing all else, they tried to blow up the Gap. Who would have stood to benefit most if that had succeeded, and a new road had been surveyed, which, according to the dictates of the topography, would necessarily have gone to Laramie instead of Cheyenne? The cattlemen? Hardly. More logically the same men who stand to gain here by the gold strike. The speculators, the politicians, the shippers, the gamblers—"

"Castine!"

The doctor raised white brows in a faint inquisition. "Victor does own several gambling halls in Laramie."

"Fannin thought there might be someone behind the LCA," she said. "Castine was up there by Eagle's Nest Gap yesterday."

"Was he?" said Edwards. There was something wry in his smile. "Perhaps, now that you see what you're up against more clearly, your reactions will be different. Not just the Laramie Cattle Association. A force even stronger than they. And now that they failed yesterday to blow up the Gap, things will really start to move fast. Has he Black Hill stage agent approached you about a franchise through your land yet?"

"No," she said.

"It has been rumored they are the shippers who mean to carry the gold," said the doctor. "Don't you realize the danger you're in, Jamaica? I doubt if the Laramie crowd will make another attempt at the Gap, with Fannin up there. That only leaves you. And they'll have to reach you before you grant that franchise to Black Hills Stage."

"What good would that do?" she said. "Eliminate me and my land would go right back into the courts, the way it did when old man Kern died. The ensuing litigation would hold up any franchise they might get for months. They must know that."

"If they reached you," said Edwards, setting his drink down, "they could prevent you from granting Black Hills the franchise, and run their own wagons through your land. . . ."

He let it trail off, and sat there twirling his glass meditatively. Something crossed her face, and she took a sharp breath, rising abruptly. He looked up, a faint, wry smile touching one side of his mouth.

"There would still be considerations, Jamaica. Now that you know it isn't really Grant who sits top saddle. A business woman like yourself might be able to see the advantage of connections with whomever stood to make the largest profits out of this. An alliance—"

"With the Laramie crowd? Don't be obtuse. Cheyenne is my town. I own other property here. I would even lose here in the Spanishtown. All my friends are here, my ranch, everything I've worked for."

"How unfortunate that you should take that attitude," he said, almost inaudibly.

She stared at him for a long moment, her bosom beginning to rise and fall more perceptibly. "I always wondered how you could live so well on such a small practice, Doctor," she said, finally. "You're speaking for Castine, then." He lifted his head, starting to answer, but she cut him off, a new comprehension lighting her eyes. "Or perhaps for yourself. How much property do you hold in Laramie? Just who does control those shipping firms over there? The Laramie Valley Wagon Concern. That's a good name, a good, meaningless little name to cover up who sits on the board. The Laramie Pines Realty company. Another front. All right. If you came for them, you can go back and tell them your last attempt failed." She whirled to the door, her dark eyes flashing. "Ochorios!"

There was movement out there, and she let out a small, relaxing little breath. Then she stiffened, staring at the man who appeared in the door. Her voice sounded hollow.

"Kaycee Grant!"

"Have you got any more bourbon, Jamaica?" said the doctor. "It's the best I've had in a long time."

THE first man Victor Castine saw as he swung through the batwings of the Spanishtown was California Jack, standing casually at the bar. He was alone, with the other customers gathered away from him on either side, muttering among themselves and casting covert glances at him. Xago, the Jamaican bartender, brought him a drink with sullen reluctance, and Jack put both elbows on the bar to pick the glass up, staring into the mirror. Castine felt the man's eyes on him that way, as he passed behind him. Doctor Edwards was coming down the stairway from above. He indicated a table at the rear of the room with the tip of his cane. Castine moved over there, pulling out a chair for him, glancing at Jack.

"Looks like Laramie came to Cheyenne today. What's up?"

"I don't know, yet," said Edwards. He waited till Castine had seated himself, then leaned forward slightly. "Too bad about you and Jamaica Victor."

"What do you mean?" said Castine.

Edwards' snowy brows lifted slightly, and he waved a hand vaguely, shrugging. "I thought, seeing how it was between her and Fannin—"

"There's nothing between her and Fannin!"

"I've never seen you so vehement, Victor," said Edwards, mildly.

Castine sat there, struggling with that anger which he considered to weaken a man so, finally speaking in a strained voice. "Just what is between Fannin and Jamaica, Edwards?"

Edwards leaned forward farther, compassion in his eyes. "You've lost her, Victor. I think you know it."

Castine's words slipped in a flat, dead way from bloodless lips that barely parted, or moved. "I never wanted anything else in life, Doctor. I had never known desire, as such, until I saw her. I had eaten and slept and acquired wealth and position mechanically, because that's the way the cards fell, but I had never felt any desire for it, particularly, one way or the other. Until I met Jamaica, I had never felt desire for anything." He stopped a moment, a small muscle twitching in his face, and when he spoke again, his words were hardly audible. "And I never wanted to kill anyone, before, either, Doctor."

"Is that why you were up at Eagle's Nest Gap yesterday?" said Edwards.

Castine had been staring past the man, and his head raised as if snapped from a trance. "Ochorios told me Jamaica was up there."

"Perhaps you hadn't admitted to yourself that Jamaica was completely lost to you, then."

"Perhaps not," said Castine.

There was a clatter of boots on the stairway that turned Castine, and he saw Kaycee Grant coming down the stairs, his heavy-fleshed face dark with diffused blood, eyes flashing angrily from beneath his flat-topped hat. He started speaking before he had reached the table, in a thick, guttural voice.

"That damn Owlie French let Ochorios get away. I've got two of my boys on his tail, but he's got a horse. If Fannin's at Xaymaca, Ochorios is liable to reach him before my men catch up!"

Edwards half-rose from his chair, the

first traces of anger in his eyes. Then he settled back, glancing toward the bar to make sure the men over there hadn't heard. Finally he turned back to Castine. The gambler sat there staring from Edwards to Grant.

"You—"

"Yes, Victor," said Edwards, taking a weary breath. "I had hoped it wouldn't come out so soon, but—"

"Jamaica," said Castine, shoving back his chair. "What have you done with her?"

Edwards reached out to lay the tip of his cane on Castine's arm. "Nothing, Victor, nothing. And she will continue to be safe, if everyone concerned acts intelligently."

Castine's voice was hoarse. "What do you mean—intelligently?"

"Xaymaca is only a few minutes' ride from here," said Edwards. "If Fannin's there, we couldn't remove Jamaica before he gets into town. I have known you a long time, Victor, and have always considered you the most dangerous man I ever came across. Much more dangerous than California Jack, or Owlie French, who have already failed twice."

"I can't quite see that last card," said Castine.

"As I said, Jamaica will remain safe, if you act intelligently," murmured Edwards. "Naturally, if Fannin were seen to be killed in the street by an LCA man, it would leave a smell that might affect our control of the gold route later on. But you are not connected with us. You know how Fannin will come into town. It's your chance. If you want it, to kill him."

Castine did not answer for a moment. "What assurance have I that Jamaica won't be harmed, if I do this?"

"My word, Victor," said Edwards, smiling wryly.

Castine bent toward him, his lips barely moving, his voice a tense, hoarse whisper. "If you don't keep your word, Doctor, Fannin won't be the only one killed in this town tonight!"

EDWARDS could keep expression from crossing his face, but had no control over the way the blood receded from his cheeks, leaving them like white, seamy parchment. Castine moved his arm to shove off the tip of the cane, turned without looking at anyone and walked out of the Spanishtown. He crossed the darkening street to his hotel and went upstairs. From the top drawer of his dresser he pulled a long Navy Colt in a shoulder harness. He spun the well-oiled cylinder, checked the loads. Then he took off his cutaway, slipped the harness on, put on the coat once more. Its long tails slapped against his legs as he went downstairs and out onto the street in his deliberate, unhurried walk. He was no longer a tinhorn gambler; he was a man of affluence, with halls in both Cheyenne and Laramie, and it had been a long time since he had done something like this, himself. Yet he felt no indecision. He felt a sort of savage satisfaction that he should at last meet Webb Fannin this way. He walked into the middle of the street and turned facing south, his figure a tall, black-coated shadow reavealed dimly in the lights which had been lit on the facade of the Spanishtown.

There were a number of men still on the street. When Castine stopped, in the middle, they began to disappear. A cowman stepped off his pony and jerked the animal into an alley between the Spanishtown and Hayworth's barn next door; a teamster pulled his hay wagon up to the sidewalk and jumped off to clatter across loose boards and seek refuge in the open doorway of a store. There was not too much fuss about it. The thing had happened often enough before in this town.

Now Castine could hear the sound. It grew louder and louder in his ears. Then the white mare appeared at the corner of Capital, taking the whole width of Sixteenth to make the turn, almost crashing into a hitchrail on the opposite side of the street before it could head straight up Sixteenth. Fannin must have caught sight of Castine about halfway down the block, because he began tugging on a rope hackamore that constituted the animal's only bridle. Castine saw then that the man had not even waited to sling on a saddle.

Fannin could not stop the heaving, lathered mare till he was at the alleyway between the Spanishtown and Hayworth's. There, right up against the curb, he managed to slow the prancing, excited animal long enough to swing off. He took a step out into the street, and Castine saw that he had again thrust the gun naked through his belt the way he had formerly worn it.

"Castine?" he said.

"Yes, Fannin," said Castine.

* * *

Webb Fannin stood there in the street a moment after Castine had gone down. Then, his hand still tingling to the heavy explosion of the Pond, he ran forward to the man, catching a lapel of his coat to pull him up so his face would come into the light cast by the oil lamps flickering on the facade of the Spanishtown. He dropped him back into the street and ran up onto the walk. People were beginning to spill onto the street now, and he bumped into half a dozen men surging through the batwings of the saloon.

"What was it, Fannin?" someone who knew him shouted.

"Out of my way!" he roared, flinging one man aside so hard he crashed into one of the upright supports of the wooden awning, brushing another the opposite direction to stagger across the planks of the walk and trip and fall. "Out of my way! Where's Jamaica?" Then he had his hands on Xago, the bartender, almost throwing him aside too before recognizing the man.

"We were at Xaymaca getting supplies to go back to Eagles' Nest," shouted Fannin. "Pappy and Terrance are right behind me. Where's Jamaica, Xago?"

"Upstairs. Grant and Edwards, somehow—I don't know what's going on—"

FANNIN flung the man aside and charged through the remainder of townsmen. He stumbled into a deal table and caught it by edge to heave it out of his way rather than waste time going around it. The table crashed off on its side and he thundered through the emptied saloon like a crazy bull, shaking the stairs as he took them three at a time, so filled with that rage now he was not conscious of anything but the driving desire to reach Grant and the others. He heard muffled sounds from Jamaica's chamber. Not waiting to see whether the door was locked, he simply charged into it with his shoulders. It had been locked, well enough, and the heavy portal shook with the weight of his great body smashing into it. Roaring in animal rage and pain, he leaped back and threw himself at it again. The lock gave and the door swung open, plunging him into the parlor.

The wine portiers had been pulled down from the windows overlooking Sixteenth, and Jamaica's potted begonias and oxalis were dumped all over the floor as if there had been a struggle. He ran into her bedroom. The side door, which led to the stairs opening on the alley between the barn next door and this building, was closed. He rushed to the bare windows overlooking Sixteenth.

He could see Terrible Terrance O'Riley and Pappy Clark turning the corner from Capital into Sixteenth, and bellowed down at them. "Pappy, Terrance—get them! Stop Grant and his men! They're down in this alley somewhere with Jamaica."

At that moment, Kaycee Grant burst from the alley out onto Sixteenth, forking his bay, followed by Owlie French and California Jack. The two men rode on either side of Jamaica, each holding one of her bound arms in his hand. They headed straight across the street toward the opposite alley, which led through the buildings of that side onto the railroad yards and to open country. Fannin raised his Pond to fire, checked himself barely in time, realizing he might hit Jamaica. Pappy and the Irishman booted their jaded animals into a run up the street, and Pappy pulled one of his French pistols from his shoulder belt, then stopped with it pointed upward, realizing that he too might hit Jamaica.

With a guttural oath, Fannin lifted a leg over the window sill and swung it out onto the wooden awning. The four riders disappeared into the black maw of the alley across the street, and Pappy and Terrance were just about to swing into a turn after them when a last figure appeared from the alley on this near side. Fannin heard the bark of a gun, saw Pappy Clark throw up his hands and slide from his Apaloosa jackass.

Fannin's excited mare was still prancing in circles on this near side of the street. The man who had appeared from the alley ran toward the horse, and Fannin recognized him. "You can't ride that mare, Edwards," he bellowed. "Nobody can ride that mare."

But Edwards had already run up inside the circle the horse had been cutting, meeting it as the beast came back around, and swinging up with an amazing alacrity. The animal pinwheeled and tried to duck its head for a buck, but the doctor gave it such a vicious kidney-kick that the mare screamed with the pain and bolted straight

for the alleyway leading to the train yards.

"Get him, Terrance," shouted Fannin, sliding down the wooden overhang now. "Stop him!"

But Terrance, oblivious to everything, had swung off his horse and was kneeling by Pappy Clark, and Doctor Edwards raced past him into the alley.

Fannin turned his ankle in the long drop from overhang to street. Cursing bitterly, he got to his feet and started in a limping run toward the opposite alley. He could hear Pappy Clark before he reached the two of them.

"That's what I meant back there when I saw that varmint up on the slope after Kaycee's bunch ran off them cattle we were branding. I thought it looked like the doctor, but I couldn't believe my eyes, I didn't think he could fork a horse, and all the time he didn't have no more lame leg than my Apaloosa jackass." He choked off, pawing at the Irishman. "This is the last squaw-hitch, Terrance, we've thrown the last aprejo on the mule—"

"No, you little dried-up old gombeen man," shouted Terrance, "you know we got a long jog ahead of us."

"Not this time, Terrance, this trap won't shut on any more beaver, but before I ride off, there's something I got to tell you."

"Is he hit bad?" panted Fannin, staggering up to them.

"He ain't even scratched," said Terrance. "You know he always carries on this way. He'll last as long as the corncrakes sing in Athlone."

"No, Terrance, there ain't no back way out'n this varmint hold, but before winter sets in for good, I got something I—want."

Pappy Clark trailed off, grasped once at Terrance, sank back. The big Irishman crouched there, staring at Pappy Clark. He made no sound, but tears began to roll his cheeks. Suddenly it escaped him in a hoarse bellow.

"They killed him. And he didn't even get to tell me what he wanted. Do you hear that, Fannin? They killed Pappy and he never got to tell me what he wanted!"

With that awful blank look in his face, O'Riley rose in jerks, like an automaton, pulling his great machete from his belt, and whirled to run down the alley, shouting in a crazed way.

"You think you can get away with that? You think you can kill Pappy and get away? Not as long as they remember Saint Patrick in Ireland. Do you hear me? This is Terrible Terrance O'Riley coming with his makeet and you couldn't get away in all the years between here and the Battle of Ventry!"

UNABLE to keep up with the men on his lame foot, Fannin was forced to drop behind. The firing began before he had gone completely through the alley. Then he came in a limping run from the narrow alley into the open train yards, and saw it. The 7:33 from Omaha had pulled in before Grant and his party could cross the tracks, and the long line of freight cars blocked them off from the open country beyond. The puffing engine and squealing cars had excited all the horses, and in wheeling about over there, Owlie French must have been caught by the still moving cars and knocked off his horse, for he lay in a grotesque heap by the tracks. California Jack had let go Jamaica and wheeled back toward the alley, along with Kaycee Grant, and it was these two

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
*F-N TEST?
*The Famous Finger Nail Test
1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.
YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK LIKE THIS WITH NEW
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
2 Only a little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or toilet goods counter.
CREAM-OIL CHARLIE SAYS: "IT CONTAINS LANOLIN!"
3 TUNE IN ... 2 NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sun. evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
LANOLIN

who had opened fire on Terrance. The Irishman had already been struck, and was staggering a little in his run.

"Stop that crazy Irishman, Jack," shouted Grant, fighting his spooked horse and trying to shoot at the same time.

"You can't stop me," roared the Irishman, stumbling as another bullet struck him, and going on ahead with that machete, "not as long as there's a colleen in Dublin; not as long as—"

He broke off as he was hit again, almost fell, caught himself. Then he had reached California Jack. The man pumped one more shot into O'Riley before that machete swung in the air. The blade came away bloody, and Jack was no longer in his saddle. Still firing, Kaycee Grant tried to wheel away from Terrance O'Riley. His whole great body jerking to the shots, O'Riley caught the man's bridle, pulling himself up against the horse, and again that Mexican knife swung.

"No!" screamed Grant.

"Yes!" screamed O'Riley, and struck again, and Grant slipped off his horse onto the Irishman and they went down together.

Back by the train, Doctor Edwards had been trying to force Jamaica's horse along with his, but the white mare was fighting him viciously, and seeing Fannin's approach behind O'Riley, the doctor let go the woman and turned the mare down the line of slowly moving cars. Released, Jamaica's excited horse bolted, and bound as she was, the sudden surge threw her from the saddle. Fannin stopped there, just on this side of where O'Riley and Grant and California Jack lay in a sprawled heap. Edwards was already too far away for accuracy, if he fired at the man. For one terrible moment, he could not do it. Then, very deliberately, with pain constricting his chest, he raised the heavy Pond front-loader, and squeezed the trigger. The white mare leaped into the air, with an agonized scream, and then fell off sideways against the freight cars. Doctor Edwards' mouth was open as he went beneath the wheels, but whatever sound he made was lost beneath the other noise.

Fannin did not have to stop at O'Riley to see the man was dead. He must have been hit a dozen times. Fannin stumbled on past to where Jamaica lay. He knelt by her, mumbling her name in hoarse anxiety, lifting her head.

"I'm all right, I guess," she said, and then put her face against his chest, sobbing in reaction. "It was Doctor Edwards all the time. He owned controlling stock in the Laramie Wagon Concern and was hooked up with half a dozen other big interests in Laramie that stood to lose their shirts if Cheyenne got the benefit of this boom. Rumors of the gold strike up there started them out on this attempt to get control of Eagle's Nest Gap last January. It was Edwards who had sent for you in the first place. He meant to hire you for the very job Grant and his men were doing. But when Edwards heard you had saved me from Grant on the Cheyenne road, he thought we might have gotten together, and didn't meet you in the Spanishtown as he had promised."

"I'm glad he didn't—now," said Fannin. "I didn't know who had sent for me then. I guess I wouldn't have played his game anyway."

"Game?" she said, raising her head momentarily to look at what lay behind him, and then burying her face in his chest again. "Pappy . . . Terrance . . . Castine . . . all of them—and only you left. I guess you were right. You haven't found a game they can beat you at."

"There's one game," he said.

She raised her tear-stained face to his. Neither of them could speak of it now, so close to what had just happened, but he saw it in her eyes. He had won at that game, too.

THE END

MAPPING WITHOUT EXPLORING

Many inaccessible spots in the United States—sections of the Grand Canyon of Colorado, the Southwestern deserts, great swamplands, and impassable mountain areas—soon will be mapped, accurately and to the last detail, though they may never have been explored. Aerial photographers of the U.S. Army Map Service will do the job from planes using systems developed during World War II. Many newly enlisted volunteers in the Regular Army are selecting branches of service in which they can be trained in map-making, meteorological work and other peacetime duties.

SLOW-MOTION GUN-HAND!

By GIFF CHESHIRE

AFTERWARD, when you saw Ossie Malone, dusty and sweating as he fanned cattle out of the twisting High Hecla ravines, or pitched hay on the sun-baked flats or, with the help of the twins, hammered away on a leaky roof, you found it hard to credit that once he was the laziest cowpoke who ever rode into the high desert country. You'd have difficulty in accepting that Sandy Bragin, the Twin Rocks lawyer, found him that first day stretched under a juniper, the afternoon sun on his boots and crawling slowly up his long legs and Ossie dreading the ordeal of making a slight clockwise shift.

It was the thousand-dollar stake in his pocket, the unaccustomed profits of an evening's lucky poker some days before, that had put Ossie there, stretched long and lanky, alternately studying a dot of

"You the one who cut the wire up at the springs?" the old man exploded.

Ossie Malone was the laziest cowpoke west of the Rockies when lawshark Sandy Bragin caught Ossie in a thousand-dollar death-trap, and a job that would only end when that never-sweat saddle-tramp chawed his way through a mountain of bacon, beans—and bullets!

crystal blue sky through a hole in his hat and a design for an easy life.

The lawyer saw only a pair of legs jutting from under the juniper, halted his horse in the dusty wagon road that crossed the desert, and gazed aloft for buzzards. Seeing none and not recognizing the brand on the flea-bitten pony staked nearby, he rode over curiously.

He said, "Having trouble, pardner?"

Ossie sat up, readjusting his hat. He was close to thirty, a weathered man with friendly eyes and an untroubled face. "It's a mite hard keeping that sun behind a tree," he confessed.

Sandy Bragin swung down, pushing back his hat as he considered Ossie. He was middle-aged, with alert blue eyes in a dust-complexioned face, and he was bald except for a fringe of sandy hair that matched his beetle eyebrows. After a moment's thought, he asked, "Looking for work?"

Ossie jumped. "It shore kin ketch up with a feller in the dangest places!" he complained.

"What I've got's a easy job," Bragin assured him. "I've got this little place and I need a caretaker, is all. Somebody just to keep a eye on things. Pays ten dollars a month and found. Good found, too."

Ossie climbed slowly to his feet, slapping dust from his faded, patched Levis with extraordinarily long hands. "Just somebody to be there, huh?"

"That's what it amounts to, pardner. You interested?"

Ossie was. He wondered how come this jigger had to pick up an obvious saddle tramp for a custodial job, but a thought of superior force crowded this from his mind. Caretaking, at ten dollars a month plus found, might take the strain off his bankroll for a considerable time. The best job he'd ever had was as night watchman in a wool warehouse. Though smelly, a sack of wool was mighty soft to sleep on. Yet he had certain curiosities.

"What all you got on this place,"

"Good house. Water. Shade."

"Any stock?"

Sandy Bragin smiled disparagingly. "That's what I hope to have some day, pardner. I'm a lawyer. You know, town-jigger wantin' to make a little money on the side. But business ain't been so good lately and I can't do much. Things go to pieces with nobody out there. But there's a few steers, all right. You won't be lonesome."

Ossie realized the man's embarrassment and did not dwell on his poverty. "What's for found?"

Bragin grinned. "I'm a hearty eater, myself. It's one of the few pleasures a man gets. I'll okay you charging stuff to me at Allbright's mercantile, and it's plumb up to you what you eat." He slapped Ossie on the back. "I won't bother you much. You kin run things your own way. What say we ride into town together and talk it over?"

That sounded all right to Ossie. Even a hotel bed and blankets were better than a juniper in the high desert nights, which were inclined to be chilly. He nodded and turned toward his horse.

TWO HOURS later he was in Sandy Bragin's law office. "Let's make it business-like," Bragin was saying. "You don't know me and I don't know you. This ain't meant to reflect on you, personal, Mr. Malone, but I've had a little trouble with other jiggers I've had out there. Lettin' things go to pot. Even stealin'. You got any money you could put up for a bond?"

Ossie grew wary. "Why, now—"

"Just something I could hold till we get acquainted. Once I'm sure of you I'll give it back." Bragin smiled. "I'll give you a receipt, of course."

Ossie could not deny that the proposition looked attractive. A nice, easy caretaking job. Grub, with himself doing the buying. Knowing Ossie Malone, he realized that his stake might better be left in the custody of a less impulsive man. This job might provide months of easy living, after which he could take his intact wealth and resume his former, indolent plans. He said, with some uncertainty, "I got a little over a thousand dollars."

"About right, I'd say." The lawyer wrote for a few moments on a sheet of letter paper, scrawled his signature, then handed it to Ossie.

It read: "The following agreement is entered into this date between Finley Bragin and Oscar Malone, parties of the first and second part, to wit: Oscar Malone agrees to spare no pains in taking proper

and reasonable care of the ranch known as the Bar B and all its appurtenances and activities. As guarantee of his proper discharge of this responsibility Oscar Malone this date posts with Finley Bragin a bond in the sum of one thousand dollars. It is understood and agreed that any damages from derelictions on the part of Oscar Malone are deductible from this sum, the residue to be returned to said Malone upon mutual termination of this agreement. In return for these services, Finley Bragin agrees to pay a stipend in the amount of ten dollars monthly, plus found, and authorizes said Malone to purchase and charge to said Bragin for the provisions for said found."

The lawyer blew on his finger nails. "There you are, receipt for the money, agreement as to responsibilities and your authority for eating on me. It's just that I've had such poor luck with the others. You sign there where I did."

Ossie had never felt at home among high-flown phrases, but on the other hand he knew that these lawyer-fellers couldn't even buy a pair of rawhide laces for their boots without doing it up smart and legal. This Bragin was well known in the town of Twin Rocks, for several men had spoken to him respectfully as they rode in. Bragin had his name on the door. The man had a right to protect his interests. And here was a proper receipt for Ossie's money, plus authority for him to charge grub to the man. He took the pen and signed.

"How do I find this here Bar B?"

"First we'll go over to Allbright's and I'll tell him it's okay for you to charge anything you want. There's stuff out there to feed you till you kin come in with the buckboard. Uh—the money."

Ossie counted it out and handed it over, then pocketed the receipt.

The little Bar B proved to be everything Ossie had hoped for. The house was small but in good repair and well furnished, and it set in a grove of locusts that let the sun in only in patches. There was a well, and the water was good. There were several outbuildings, and a couple of peeled-pole corrals, but they were empty. Coming out from town, through flat country frequently broken by rugged rock outcrops, he had seen no steers, but it would be easy for a handful to keep out of sight in rough country like this. He found enough grub in the kitchen to last several days, making it unnecessary to dash across the baking desert to town until he'd rested a little from all this business and travel. He fixed his supper, smoked through the evening under the sweet-scented locusts, then went to bed.

He rose late the next morning, pleased with his prospects and his last doubt of the deal dispelled. He was lacking in certain information as to boundaries and the like, but this could be determined when he went into town again or when Sandy Bragin came out to visit. In midmorning he took a turn through the outbuildings. There was a little hay in the barn, a lot of harness, and there was a mower and hay rake in the machinery shed. The place did not look rundown or long deserted. He saw that Sandy Bragin had real ambitions for the spread and reflected that one Ossie Malone had best be gone before the lawyer came into the necessary money.

That afternoon Sandy Bragin surprised Ossie by appearing suddenly at the Bar B. Ossie did not hear him ride up, due to the fact that hoof-beats had little effect on a somnolence such as his. He opened his eyes and there was the lawyer, standing beside his horse and frowning at him thoughtfully, as he had on their first encounter.

"A mite early to knock off, ain't it, Ossie?" the lawyer asked.

"Why, everything's in good shape, Mr. Bragin," Ossie protested, climbing to his feet.

"I come out on the other road. That swamp grass hay'll burn up in another couple of days if it ain't cut."

"What hay?"

"Ain't you looked the place oger?" Then Bragin grinned in apology. "I should've got out sooner to show you around, but I been busy. Get your horse, and we'll take a ride."

They rode for a long while, and a deep uneasiness grew in Ossie. The field of hay appeared to comprise a good twenty acres. Then, threading through a few canyons, they came out onto a big flat again. Ossie frowned when he noticed the towers of three distant windmills. Each was surrounded by what appeared to be at least a hundred steers. The blades of the windmills were not turning.

"There ain't been much wind," Bragin said worriedly. "Bet the holes're dry."

"That all the water you got?" Ossie asked, in a tight voice.

"That's all. When there ain't no wind, we gotta pump by hand." Temper crawled into the lawyer's eyes. "Used to have a water hole over on the Slash S boundary but that schemin', thievin' Deke Spencer—But never mind. Ossie, you gotta pump them steers some water."

Ossie Malone was a hard man to rile, but he was some heated now. "Hay to cut! And I betcha three hundred steers to pump water for! That your idea of a caretakin' job? Mister, you can take it and push it up your nose!"

Sandy Bragin stared at him for a thoughtful moment. "Our agreement can be terminated only by mutual consent, Ossie. And I ain't agreeable, so it ain't mutual. You agreed to take reasonable care of things out here. Is letting a stand of good winter hay burn up reasonable? Is letting a lot of poor, thirsty steers go without water reasonable? Could you get any cowman jury to say so, should I sue you?"

"Sue and be hanged, you schemin', black-legged, tin-bill—!"

Bragin shook his head, grinning finally. "Uh-huh. I got a thousand dollars I can charge any lost hay to, or any dead steers! You know where the pumps are, and I'll show you where to find the work horses."

OSSIE MALONE was a busy man in the days that followed, too busy even to go to town for groceries though his belly began to rumble from scant rations. For the wind did not blow, and water had to be pumped each day. The scorching sun grew even hotter, and when not on a pump handle, Ossie had to be on the mower. He sweat and cursed and raised blisters, but he knew that he was doomed. Sandy Bragin probably didn't care a hang whether he did it or not. He would admire a chance to nick that thousand-dollar bond. So Ossie labored while he tried hopelessly to figure out means of extricating himself from the bondage.

Three days passed with no change in the weather, unless it was for the worse, and Ossie had to make the choice between paying for the herd or a lot of burned-up hay, for the steers turned into bawling sponges. It was then that Ossie recalled Sandy Bragin's irate reference to a water hole he had once possessed, over on the Slash S boundary. That day Bragin had also explained that the Slash S lay to the west of the Bar B, being owned by one scheming, thieving Deke Spencer. Ossie rode over there.

The springs were not hard to locate and were closed off by barbed wire. There was nothing to mark the boundary line, and he couldn't see a Slash S creature anywhere on the flat, rock-broken desert. Ossie gazed at the big water hole, glanced at the blisters on his palms, mounted and went thundering toward the Bar B homesite.

Parting barbed wire was a lesser sin than wasting good water, Ossie told himself, a couple of hours later, as he plied a pair of wire cutters. He spent the rest of that day chousing Bar B stuff over into this vicinity.

The next morning he was free again to mow the hay, which was taking on a dangerous burnt-umber hue. He had had time only to raise a good sweat when a pair of riders came pounding across the stubble, their approach having been drowned out by the clatter of the mower. One was a hard-bitten oldster with a sharp nose and drooping mustache, and the other was a girl.

"You cut that wire up at the springs?" the old man exploded.

Ossie climbed down from the mower seat, reached for the bandana in his hip pocket to mop sweat from his face, and instantly a sixgun appeared in the old man's hand, a wicked gleam in his eyes. Ossie let his brow go unmopped. "I reckon you're Deke Spencer."

"You're danged right I am."

"The water's only going to waste. I didn't see nothing using it. Didn't see no fresh tracks."

"That's neither here nor there, and if Dotty wasn't here I'd let daylight into your brassy skull! But blood makes Dotty sick. I fixed the fence and if I find it cut again or if I find a Bar B critter on my land, I'm comin' again alone and a-foggin'." He whirled his horse and galloped away.

The girl tarried, eyeing Ossie's sweaty figure and the new mown hay. She wasn't as young as he had thought at first, nigh onto his own age, he guessed. She said, "His last man got fired for being too slow,

but you're sure industrious. I don't like Sandy Bragin, but I like an industrious man."

Caution stirred in Ossie. Here was danger of an entirely new sort. He waved a disparaging hand. "I'm just doing the reasonable thing. But why in blazes won't your dad let somebody else use that water hole, long as he ain't? Seems to me it'd only be the decent, neighborly thing."

"Get decent and neighborly with Sandy Bragin?" the girl snorted. "Mister, that smart law-shark only got caught in his own trap. He used to own half that water hole till he outdone himself."

"So?" he said. "How come?"

Dot Spencer smiled with satisfaction. "The only thing on record is a metes and bounds description of that boundary, made maybe fifty years ago. See that rocky butte off there, couple of hundred feet high? That's Bald Butte. See t'other, about the same size and half a mile south? That's Rattlesnake Rock. The legal description of that boundary says it's on a line, as the crow flies, between the west faces of Bald Butte and Rattlesnake Rock. The two spreads've always shared that water hole, even when the owners changed. But when Sandy Bragin bought the Bar B he looked up the description and he got smart. A lot's happened to them rotten old rocks in fifty years. They keep caving in. Well, sir, Sandy Bragin raised a legal point. He claimed a cliff was a rise in the ground and that those two commenced to be cliffs at the foot of the talus slope. They'd crawled west. He had a line surveyed from the foot of one slope to the foot of the other and it put the water hole on his land completely and he fenced it off." She chuckled. "It was Sandy Bragin that built the fence he's cussing now, mister!"

"But how come Deke Spencer's got the say now?"

"Deke went to court. He argued his own case, and he sure looked silly up against a smart lawyer like Bragin. But the jury was old-timers and they knew the original idea was to divide the water hole between the two spreads. Besides, nobody's exactly fell in love with Sandy Bragin in these parts. Well, sir, pa he conceded that the bluffs started where they stopped being flats, which was at the foot, all right. But the description says 'as the crow flies'. He argued that since the men who wrote that description had been dead for thirty years the legal point was how would a crow fly? You can't see from one foot to the other because of them smaller crop-ups. A crow'd have to start at the top of one butte to see where he was heading, no matter which way he flew it, nor where he landed. And the jury plumb agreed with him and fixed the boundary at the tops and it shoved the line east about the same distance Bragin wanted it pushed west. He didn't have no more water hole, and Deke Spencer left it fenced."

"Yeah, but how come?"

"Sandy Bragin plumb forgot that when rock fell down to shove them taluses west the top of the cliffs kept traveling east about the same distance. But I wouldn't cut no more barbed wire, mister. That ought to convince you pa's a bad man to tangle with." She smiled prettily and pounded away.

A NEW TRIAL laid itself upon Ossie's sweating shoulders. The Bar B stuff, having been moved to the vicinity of the natural water hole, was disinclined to be moved back to the undependable hand pumps. It kept crowding and bawling around the fence, obviously on Slash S land, and Ossie remembered Deke Spencer's violent threat. He was kept from the haying.

Sandy Bragin rode out from town again that evening, coming down to the hay swamps where Ossie was mowing away into the dusk. He seemed in a jovial mood. "Well, Ossie, I got another proposition to make you."

Ossie's eyes narrowed. "You stay away from me with them propositions!"

"You'll like this one, mebbe. Deke Spencer come in to see me, this afternoon. He told me if you laid hand on that fence again he'd fill your carcass with lead and sink you in the water hole. So I think you better kill him."

Ossie stared. "What's that?"

Bragin grinned and lighted a cigar. "Look, Ossie, he needs killin'. And I'd love to be there to see it, only it wouldn't be smart. You bush the old son, and I'll help prove it was self-defense. He threatened you to me and in front of witnesses. With him out of the way, I can handle that

man-crazy girl of his. I'll not only have that water hole back, I'll have the whole blasted Slash S."

Ossie was looking dangerous. "Mister, whatever gave you a idea I could be hired to do a sneak killing for you?"

"Look, Ossie. Do this little favor, and I'll tear up that agreement. I'll give you back your thousand dollars and five hundred, besides."

"If I don't?"

"It can be terminated only by mutual agreement. Cross me in this, Ossie, and hell'll have icicles on it before I'll feel mutual toward you. You just think it over, Ossie, then when you're ready, go to it." Bragin climbed onto his horse and loped off.

He was back in a couple of hours. He handed Ossie a piece of paper. "Here's a list of stuff it looks to me like ain't been getting reasonable care, Ossie. You want to fix it up, or do I charge it to you?" Again he left, his mount clattering through the night.

Ossie read it by the lamp on the kitchen table:

> Hay still standing and none of it in the barn. Burning up. Cattle straying onto neighbor's property with possibility of damage suit. Some of them wormy, badly neglected. Some shingles off the barn. The wagon don't look like it'd been greased in months. . . .

There was much more, but Ossie quit reading, dropped his face onto his arms and groaned.

Deke Spencer was there before breakfast, the next morning, fogging into the yard with a clatter, and tromping across the back porch, the racket freezing Ossie with a skillet in his hand.

"Blast you, mister!" the oldster raged, as he stormed into the kitchen. "I told you what'd happen if you cut that fence again!" The old Peacemaker on his hip looked as big as a cannon.

"I never cut no more fence!" Ossie said helplessly. He knew he was on the verge of being a bull's-eye.

"The heck you didn't! She's cut on all four sides! I just come from there, and a good thing I had the sense to check up on you! After what Sandy Bragin done to me he can pump water. Or pay you to."

Ossie's knees were weak. Bragin had cut the fence on his little pasear the evening before. Trying to guarantee a gun battle between one Malone and this old rooster, with a fair chance that both would be killed.

"He ain't paying me to," Ossie gasped. "Seems to me like I'm kind of paying my own wages."

"How's that?" Spencer asked sharply. Ossie told him of the deal, and the old man began to cackle. "So he's making foxy with the legal words again, is he? Mebbe it ain't so much your fault, feller. Clear outta these parts an' I'll let you go."

"He's got my thousand dollars." The idea hit Ossie then, the memory of how this crusty old-timer had turned the tables on the smart lawyer. He went for his hat in long strides. "Help yourself to some breakfast if you want any, Deke. Me, I'm headin' for town."

He drove the wagon with the hayrack on it, and when he reached Twin Rocks he tied the outfit to the hitchrack in front of Allbright's mercantile. He went inside and he started ordering provisions.

When Seth Allbright had the counter piled high and had filled the floor space in front of it, he paused and scratched his head. "Mebbe I better go see Sandy Bragin about this, Malone."

"He okayed me chargin' stuff to him, didn't he? Both of us heard him say 'I wantcha to eat hearty out there, Ossie!' "

"Yeah, but—"

"Still, mebbe you *had* better go see him." Ossie relaxed and rolled a smoke as the merchant charged out of the store. It was the first one he had enjoyed for several days. He was just finishing it when the merchant came back with Sandy Bragin.

The lawyer looked at the stuff on the counter, switched a worried gaze to the stuff on the floor. "What's all this you're buying here, Ossie?"

"Grub," Ossie told him. "Laying in my winter's supply. With the work I got ahead of me, I won't get back again before spring. And I'll sure be eating like a horse."

Bragin mopped his brow with a soiled handkerchief. "Well, you sure won't be short of grub."

Ossie shrugged lightly. "Shucks, I ain't half done, yet. Want to see my list? I writ it on the back of that list of jobs you give me, last night."

(Continued on page 98)

LITTLE BILL'S PARDNER

By MARVIN J. JONES

Little Bill knew now that the man was coming down to kill.

The blood-hunger that had turned a friendly, furry little pup into lifeless buzzard-bait would never be quenched, Little Bill knew, until he set himself, .45 in hand, as man-bait for a shoot-in-the-back, cold-deck killer!

BIG BILL had been out of sorts ever since Windy Dalton had brought the drummer's half-grown collie back from town and given it to Little Bill. Big Bill grumbled that he didn't want any fool dogs running the cows to death, but Windy allowed that the dog was no fool and besides, he'd gotten stuck with the pup. He claimed the drummer had left town at a speed that couldn't be equalled by man or beast and left the pup stranded. Windy

should have known, because he was the one who chased the drummer out of town.

Little Bill was tickled pink. Like Windy said, the pup was a lot smarter than some of the hands drawing wages at the Double B. But Little Bill played it safe and kept the collie out from underfoot. Especially, he kept a close watch on Injun Jim. Windy had told Little Bill that there wasn't nothing tastier to an Injun than stewed pup.

Little Bill couldn't understand how one little old pup could upset Big Bill so, but things sure weren't going right on the Double B. Even Windy was getting close-mouthed and moody and two of the hands had gotten into a fist fight down at the corral a couple of mornings ago. It didn't amount to much, but Little Bill knew it was because Big Bill was riding the boys pretty hard and everybody was walking around with a chip on his shoulder and his jaw jutting out.

Even Little Bill was feeling a little cranky. He was out in the barn, saddling up the paint and figuring on maybe riding over to see Clara Wilson and check on the apple pie situation with Mrs. Wilson. He was having some trouble. The pup had managed to climb up a ladder to the hayloft. The ladder was designed for Old Charley's rheumatism and didn't give the collie much trouble. He was worrying at something underneath the hay and the growling and yelping was making the paint as jumpy as an Eastern schoolmarm passing a saloon on a Saturday night.

Little Bill turned his head to yell at the pup and about that time the thing the pup was chewing on came loose and the collie went backward down the ladder, yelping everytime his back hit a cross board. When he hit the barn floor, the half-filled gunny sack he'd been tugging at landed on top of him and he howled like he'd been gutted. The paint pranced around and came down on Little Bill's foot. Little Bill borrowed some of Windy Dalton's vocabulary right then and there.

The whole thing made quite a bit of commotion and right in the middle of it, Little Bill stopped hopping and holding his foot, and his jaw dropped so hard it bounced against his breast bone. He saw Big Bill standing in the doorway of the barn. Big Bill's face was white as a flour sack and he was breathing hard like he'd been running. But what really made Little Bill's eyes bulge was the .45 in his hand. Big Bill had the hammer eared back; his finger was twitching on the trigger and the barrel was lined up right on the collie's head.

LITTLE BILL'S heart gave a couple of flops and then started a race with itself.

"He hasn't done nothing wrong," Little Bill managed to gulp finally. "H-h-he just scared himself silly with that old gunny sack—th-that's all!"

Big Bill turned his head slowly and looked at Little Bill, not answering, but a little dab of color came in each cheek. Little Bill tried to laugh—natural-like—and make his voice cheerful.

"I reckon I'm going to have to call him Spook," he told Big Bill, a little quiver in his voice. "Cause he sure spooked himself with that old sack."

Big Bill dropped his eyes and the blood flooded into his face. Little Bill took a slow, deep breath. He knew he had won. He watched while his dad let down the hammer of the .45 and slid it back into the holster. Then he turned back quick to his saddling and was careful not to look at Big Bill.

"I guess from all the racket going on in here, you figgered the pup had spooked the paint and I was getting tromped to death," Little Bill said carelessly.

Big Bill's voice was thick when he finally answered. "Yeah," he said quickly. "Yeah, I sure did." He stepped forward, picked up the sack and then just stood there sort of hesitantly, looking first at the collie and then at Little Bill.

"Howdy, men!" said a quiet voice from the barn door.

It was Sheriff Tuck. The old lawman was standing in the doorway, looking in at them, a slow grin crinkling the corners of his eyes. Little Bill went right over and shook hands. He was always glad to see Sheriff Tuck, partly because Tuck always treated him like a full-grown hand instead of just a younker.

Big Bill tossed the sack over in a corner and came over and shook hands too, but he didn't act any too cordial.

"Haven't seen you in quite a spell," Big Bill said.

The collie came over and sniffed at the sheriff's boots and he bent over and patted the pup's head. "Been pretty busy," the

lawman said, straightening up, "what with one thing and another."

"And election coming up!" Big Bill said, a hard edge in his voice that made Little Bill look at him in surprise, but Tuck didn't seem to notice.

"Well, yes," the lawman admitted mildly. "Things are always a mite touchy around election time." He grinned again. "That's why I'm sort of out scouting around."

"I can tell when you have something special on your mind," Big Bill said, the edge still in his voice.

"That's a mighty cute pup you got there," Tuck told Little Bill and then looked at Big Bill. "What's happened is Sheriff Tapis claims he's chased a gent named Fred Morrow over into my county and wants me to chase him back or, better yet, maybe catch him. So if you see any strangers around, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know."

"I'll keep an eye open," Big Bill said.

"He's a big fellow—big as you—according to the description," Sheriff Tuck said. "Got a long scar running across his forehead that shows if he don't keep his hat pulled down good. Awful handy with a gun. He don't take no chances when he gets in a corner. He shoots for the head—and he don't miss."

Little Bill's eyes were as big as saucers. "What's he done?" he asked Tuck.

"Well," Sheriff Tuck said slowly, his voice getting kind of cold and hard. "There isn't much he hasn't done, son. He's robbed banks, quite a lot of them. He's wanted pretty bad for that up North. But worse than that, he's a killer—a mean killer."

The old lawman's voice was so grim that Little Bill felt funny, just hearing him say that. He noticed it affected Big Bill too, because his dad's face got kind of pale.

"I never heard of Morrow killing just for the sake of it," Big Bill said, his voice tight.

Sheriff Tuck shook his head slowly. "Maybe you heard about him when he first started out," he said mildly. "But he had that mean streak in him even then. He was cruel like an Indian in some ways. Real young, he was in trouble for stabbing a horse cause the owner had licked him fair in a fist fight."

Big Bill didn't say anything and neither did Little Bill.

"His family got him out of that," Tuck went on, "and a dozen other things. When he was seventeen, he was mixed up in a bank robbery, but he got out of that, because the fellow that was in it with him claimed to do it alone. Everybody knew better, though." The lawman bent down again and ruffled the collie's ears. The pup did a couple of fast loops around the barn floor then stopped and growled at the offending gunny sack, finally advancing, stiff-legged, to sniff at it. Sheriff Tuck grinned.

"You'd think there was a side of bacon in there," he said as the pup began to whine.

"Yeah," said Big Bill, sort of cross and turned to Little Bill. "If you're going by that nester family down on the crick bottom, you drop off that sack of vittles, son." He turned and walked toward the door and then turned. "I'll keep an eye open, Sheriff," he added.

"Thanks," said Sheriff Tuck.

Little Bill stared after his dad, his mouth wide open and then went and took the sack away from the pup and looked in it. Sure enough, it had a big slab of bacon in there, some flour and a passel of beans.

"Well, if that don't beat all get out!" Little Bill said, swallowing.

"How's that, son?" asked Sheriff Tuck, in his mild voice.

Little Bill swallowed again and brushed at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Why, that ornery, wall-eyed dad of mine had this stuff hid out and was going to slip it over to the Hartley family without anybody knowing about it. Come to think about it, I guess he's been kind of worried about them nesters lately."

"You got a fine dad, Little Bill," Sheriff Tuck said thoughtfully, staring after Big Bill's disappearing figure.

"He—he—" Little Bill fumbled to find words and then burst out. "He'll do to ride the trail with!" He picked up the pup and held its squirming body against his face to hide the tears in his eyes. "Even if he don't like dogs much," he added, his voice muffled.

THAT NIGHT, Little Bill was dog tired by the time he had fed Spook, had his own supper and then coaxed the pup into settling down in the new dog house Old Charley had built in the corner of the yard. When the collie was snugged down in one of Big Bill's old coats, Little Bill yawned his relief and climbed the stairs to bed.

He almost stopped to talk to Big Bill in the living room, but Big Bill had the door shut tight as if he didn't want to be bothered none.

Little Bill figured it was about midnight when something woke him up. He lay there a minute, half asleep, trying to remember what he had been dreaming about and sort of listening for the noise that had awakened him. Suddenly, the dream came back to him. He had been dreaming that Big Bill had his big .45 trained on Spook again. He had been begging Big Bill not to shoot, but Big Bill's finger just kept right on squeezing the trigger. And Spook didn't even know what was happening. He just kept growling and tugging at an old, half-filled gunnysack.

Little Bill lay there, real glad that he had woke up before the dream had gone any farther, when he heard someone come along the hall in their sock feet and go down the stairs. He knew it must be Big Bill. A minute later, he heard the front door open and close. Little Bill didn't know why he got a scared feeling all of a sudden, but he did. He threw back the covers and slipped into his Levis, shirt and socks, but left off his boots. Then he hightailed it downstairs as fast and as quiet as he could.

When he got to the front door, he opened it a crack and looked out, but didn't go outside. He peered around in the shadows, trying to see where Big Bill had gone. Finally he saw his dad's big body hunched over Spook's little house and heard a low whistle. Little Bill got a gone feeling in his stomach when he realized Big Bill was feeling around in the dog house for the pup. Big Bill straightened up and whistled some more, then headed down to the barn, opened the door and went inside.

Little Bill stood in the doorway, shivering and scared, not knowing what Big Bill was up to and wondering what to do. Finally, he decided to go on down to the barn and see, but before he had crossed the yard, he saw the barn door open and Big Bill come out. There wasn't much of any place for Little Bill to hide so he just flopped down behind an old wheel barrow and hoped that Big Bill wouldn't notice him.

Big Bill didn't. He walked right on past and went back to the dog house and Little Bill saw he was carrying the pup by the scruff of the neck. Big Bill bent down and put Spook in the little house and then walked back up to the ranch house and went inside.

Little Bill wasn't scared any more. He sure felt happy. Big Bill must have heard the horses snorting down in the barn and figured the pup had gone back down there to look for the old gunny sack. He must have been afraid Spook would get tromped on or he'd never have bothered to get up out of bed and put the pup back in his house.

Little Bill got a nice glowing feeling inside when he realized that Big Bill must like the dog a little bit anyway. As soon as Big Bill had closed the front door, Little Bill went over to the dog house and, scolding in a low voice, reached in to give Spook a pat. When he did, his stomach tightened up like somebody was using his guts for shoe strings. As soon as he touched Spook's warm furry body, Little Bill knew the pup was dead.

Little Bill sat down on the ground and held Spook in his lap for quite a while, but he didn't cry any. He felt awful cold inside and his eyeballs felt dry and big and he knew too that it wasn't any horse that had stepped on the pup, because Spook's neck was broken.

Later on, Little Bill went on back to the house. He tiptoed in and saw that Big Bill hadn't gone back to bed. He was in the living room again. Little Bill stopped a minute in the hall and looked at the door as if he could see right through it, but he wasn't standing there hating Big Bill. There wasn't any feeling in him at all when he thought of Big Bill being behind that door. Then Little Bill went softly upstairs and sat on his bed and just stared out of the window.

That was why he saw the figure of the man come out from behind the barn and walk toward the house, keeping in the shadows as he came. Little Bill thought at first it was Injun Jim, or one of the hands, but when the man came up and climbed the steps to the porch, he could see that it wasn't. It was a man every bit as big as Big Bill.

LITTLE BILL heard the faint creak of the front door as it opened and he stole to the top of the stairway and looked down. The man hesitated a moment and then crossed over to the living room door and

swung it open. Little Bill heard Big Bill's startled curse, but the stranger just laughed and walked on in. He swung the door behind him but it didn't close all the way. Little Bill tiptoed down near the bottom of the stairs and peered through the railing into the living room.

"Where in hell did you put the grub?" the stranger growled. "I couldn't find it."

Big Bill sat at his desk, his big hands clenched so tight that the skin across his knuckles was white. His voice was low and careful when he spoke.

"I couldn't leave it around—the kid's dog—I'll make you up a grubstake from the kitchen."

The stranger turned and Little Bill got a look at his face. He had a bony, hawked nose, a wide mouth and thick, red lips. The lips twisted when he talked. "Whyn't you tell me about that dog?" he demanded. He shoved his hat back and Little Bill gasped. There was a broad white scar running across his forehead, just under the hairline.

Little Bill could hardly hear Big Bill's answer. "One of my hands brought the pup back from town," Big Bill said tonelessly. "I haven't seen you since then." Then he said flatly and accusingly. "You killed the pup, Fred."

The man who Little Bill knew now was Fred Morrow, laughed throatily. "He wasn't no good anyway," he sneered. "He just barked once and then came over wagging his tail when I whistled to him."

Little Bill's head swam dizzily and he had to hold fast to the railing to keep from falling down the stairs. He didn't feel mad at this big man with the ugly scar. He just felt kind of sick. He knew now why the sheriff had said what he did and looked the way he did when he was talking about Fred Morrow.

"You've got to get out of the country—and fast!" Big Bill said, his voice sounding kind of desperate.

"Why?" asked Fred Morrow calmly.

"Because the sheriff was out here and he saw the sack of supplies I had fixed up for you."

"To hell with him," Morrow said, his lips twisting and a odd shine coming into his eyes. "I'll wring his neck just like I did the pup's."

Big Bill sat still a few minutes, staring at the man in front of him and then kind of a shudder went through his muscular body.

"Listen, Fred," he said quietly, at last. "Get this through your thick head. This sheriff isn't an ordinary lawman. He's smart and he's gotten information from somewhere—a lot of it. It'll be about a day or two and he'll find where you're holing up."

Fred Morrow leaned over the desk, his voice wicked. "Maybe you told him," he growled.

"Don't be a fool," Big Bill answered wearily. "I'm just telling you—that's all."

"If he's that suspicious, you must have told him something," Morrow persisted stubbornly. "He knows we're brothers, huh?"

"Half-brothers," Big Bill corrected, his voice icy. "I don't know. I think he does. He evidently knows about the scrape I got into when I was a kid."

Fred Morrow laughed so loudly that Big Bill lifted a hand in warning and jerked his thumb toward the ceiling.

"You don't want your kid to know you're a jailbird, huh!" jeered the half brother.

Big Bill's knuckles cracked. "I paid for my mistake," he said quietly. "And your first one, too."

Morrow's face was dark with anger. "Lily white, ain'tcha?" he sneered. "And what did it get you. You took your half of the money back and then they stick you in the penitentiary because you won't tell them about the other half. Bah!"

"Fred," Big Bill said stonily. "You never could see anything straight. You killed Mom with your wild ways. Now she's gone, I don't owe you anything. I'm not going to help you again, so don't come to me again expecting it. Do you understand?"

Fred Morrow's face was ugly, but his voice got silky. "Okay, Bill. Never mind the lecture. You can relax. I'm leaving tonight."

Little Bill could see the relief in his dad's face. "I'll get you some chuck," he told his half-brother and started to get out of his chair.

"Never mind, Fred said indifferently. "I'll pick some up in town."

Big Bill froze, half out of his chair and his face got white again. "You're not going through town?" he demanded hoarsely.

His half-brother's thick lips curled m

their ugly grin. "I got business there."

Big Bill's voice shook. "So help me, Fred, if you rob the bank here, I'll—I'll—" The words strangled in his throat.

Fred Morrow's sneer menaced and mocked. Take it easy, Bill," he advised coldly. He tapped the sleek gun that lay along his thigh. "You sound like you got the bank lined up for yourself."

Big Bill came out of his chair so hard that it went over backwards and crashed against the wall. Little Bill's heart stopped, because Fred Morrow's hand flashed and his gun came out as though he had snapped his fingers and it had jumped into his hand. The muzzle pointed right at Big Bill's forehead.

Little Bill held his breath, because Big Bill was so mad and not even packing a gun, but his dad was no fool either. That .45 in his half-brother's hand was nothing to be fooled with.

"Go ahead—do something!" taunted Fred.

Little Bill's guts began to crawl. A funny light had come into the scarred man's eyes, making them shine, and his face had gotten dark with blood. His breathing came fast, like he was excited and Little Bill realized that Fred Morrow wanted to press the trigger, was eager to kill. Big Bill realized it too. He reached behind him and straightened up the chair. He sat down heavily as though all the sap had run out of him.

"Get out!" he said in a strained voice.

His half-brother laughed, cruel and shaky, and the shine was slow going out of his eyes. Little Bill knew the only reason he didn't pull the trigger was because of the noise it would make.

Finally, he holstered the gun. "I'm going," he sneered. "And don't worry about me coming back. I don't like you no better'n you like me." He spun around and started for the door and Little Bill scampered up the stairs like a rabbit.

AFTER Fred Morrow had gone outside and closed the front door, Little Bill crept down again and took a look at his dad. Big Bill was still sitting at his desk and his head was resting on his arms. It wasn't like Big Bill to be whipped by anything or scared by anything and Little Bill sat for quite a spell and tried to figure the whole thing out. Suddenly, he sort of got Big Bill's feeling inside of him. Big Bill wasn't scared of his half-brother. Big Bill was thinking of their mom. Big Bill knew that something should be done about Fred, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it, even though their mom was dead now.

When Little Bill realized that that was the battle that was going on in Big Bill's heart, he slipped upstairs again and got his hat. He buckled his heavy cartridge belt around his waist and shoved the .45 Big Bill had given him for Christmas into the holster. He sneaked downstairs with his boots in his hand and got by the parlor without Big Bill lifting his head. Little Bill figured that Big Bill would always feel a lot better in his mind if someone else turned Fred over to the sheriff, and probably their mom would feel better about it too.

After he saddled the paint, he led him down the trail a couple of hundred yards before he mounted. Just before they started down the hill toward town, Little Bill looked back. The light was still burning in the library window. Little Bill wasn't afraid, but he sure felt lonely.

There wasn't any moon and it was just once in a while that Little Bill could see a star through the clouds that were scudding around above. Little Bill was riding fast, but he didn't see anything or anybody and the first thing he knew, he hit the edge of town. There were only a few buildings that had lights in them. Little Bill skirted around Main Street and left the paint in the alley near the back of the bank. He didn't really know what he was going to do but there wasn't any reason to kick up a fuss unless Fred Morrow was actually going to try to rob the bank.

Little Bill almost had to feel his way along the alley, it was so doggone dark. When he came to the rear door of the bank, Little Bill stopped and listened but he couldn't hear any sounds inside at all, which was a relief. Just to make sure that everything was all right, he reached out and gave a little push on the door. He almost fell inside the bank building, because it swung right open.

Little Bill froze in his tracks. The door hadn't made any noise and it was a good thing it hadn't because if anyone had looked out they couldn't help seeing him silhouetted in the open doorway. Then Little Bill remembered that the big safe was upstairs

and if anyone was in the bank building, that was where they would be. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him and stood there in the pitch darkness, listening again.

When he didn't hear anything, he felt his way along the wall to the stairs and put one foot out for the bottom step. He didn't lift his boot quite high enough and it hit the edge of the step. Goose pimples chased each other up Little Bill's spine and down again and prickles of perspiration started out all over his body.

He had just about decided that it really hadn't made enough noise to be heard by anyone upstairs, when he heard a soft scuffing sound up at the top of the stairs and saw the hulking outline of a man above him. Anyone as big as that had to be Big Bill or his half-brother and Little Bill didn't need an Ouija board to tell him that it wasn't Big Bill.

The figure above shifted its position just a little and the faint light that was outlining it, gleamed suddenly on the big Colt in the man's hand. Little Bill carefully sneaked his own .45 from the holster. He was wringing wet by this time and was waiting for Fred to go back to work on the safe so he could hightail it for Sheriff Tuck, but the big man took one soft step downstairs, instead.

Suddenly an inspiration came to Little Bill. He reached over with his left hand and scratched on the step with his fingernails and let out a soft *meow*. It worked like magic. He heard a sigh of relief come from the big man at the head of the stairs and the hand holding the Colt dropped. Little Bill had a hard time keeping from sighing too.

But instead of Fred Morrow turning around and going back to the safe, he took another step downstairs and made a soft kissing sound with his lips.

"Here kitty, kitty," he said in a wheedling whisper. "Here, kitty."

Little Bill froze with horror and the .45 felt slippery in his hand. He hadn't figured on that at all. While he stood there with his head whirling, the big man took still another step down. Just then someone turned on a light in the second story of the saloon across the street and a narrow shaft of light fell across Fred Morrow's face.

"Here, kitty. Here, kitty!" whispered the big man again, his voice nervously impatient.

Little Bill's spine crawled as he stared up into the face above him. The man's lips were drawn back from his teeth, his eyes were shining and his face was so dark with blood that the long white scar stood out like a chalk mark on his forehead. It wasn't the face of a man who loved cats, or dogs, or kids—or anything else. He had the muzzle of the sixgun slanted upward and Little Bill suddenly realized he was coming down the stairs to kill the cat he thought was there, not to pet it.

COTTONWOOD JUSTICE—TEXAS STYLE

The wide loop of a Vigilante hangrope waited for Buckskin Blue and Hugh Farnsworth. But before those riders of the twisted trails did the dead man's dance, they had one grim mission to perform: the building of an honest outfit for their owlhoot-sired sons with the corpses of hooded, night-riding killers!

Don't miss this smashing saga of frontier justice:

"GUN-KINGS OF HORSETHIEF CROSSING"
By Walt Coburn

Plus two more thrilling, book-length novels:

"For Bullets, Beans, and a Boothill Grave!"
By William Heuman

"Bushwhack Day at Buckskin River"
By Tom Roan

In addition to novelettes and short stories by William R. Cox, Ed Earl Repp, Marvin J. Jones, Wayne D. Overholser, Frank Morris, Gunnison Steele, and other top-hand Western writers.

February issue on sale now!

25¢ BIG-BOOK WESTERN

LITTLE BILL knew then what he had to do—both for Big Bill and mom. He swallowed the lump in his throat and his voice was as deep and harsh as Big Bill's when he spoke.

"It ain't a cat, it's me," Little Bill said grimly.

Even though Little Bill knew what was bound to happen, he still didn't expect it to happen so fast. Before he could get his forefinger tightened on the trigger, the Colt above him had blasted out three tongues of flame that leaped down the stairs and took the hat right off his head. Then the big .45 kicked and bellowed in Little Bill's hand and because his palm was sweaty, it almost jumped out.

Little Bill was blinded by the flashes, but he heard the crash above him and felt the stairs shudder underneath his feet. He pressed himself against the wall and Fred Morrow's body plunged by him and came to a sodden stop at the bottom of the stairs. Little Bill braced himself against the wall, tthe .45 firm in his hand again, the hammer rolled back, and waited, but the big man didn't move. Little Bill pushed away from the wall and started for the door, his knees feeling weak and a funny, gone feeling grabbing at his guts. Then the grim voice of Sheriff Tuck came from outside.

"Come out of there with your hands up plenty high!"

"It's me!" Little Bill answered weakly as he stumbled outside.

Little Bill's head was whirling, but when he heard someone curse in a voice that wasn't Sheriff Tuck's, his head cleared a bit. It was Big Bill and he stepped up and grabbed Little Bill by the shoulder. He stared down into Little Bill's face for a couple of long seconds before he could say anything.

"Did—did you—" But he couldn't seem to get the rest out.

"I reckon," answered Little Bill, gulping, knowing what his dad was trying to find out.

Sheriff Tuck had gone inside and Little Bill saw the quick flare of a match and then the lawman came back out, carrying Little Bill's hat. He didn't say a word, just punched out the crown. Three holes were laid out in a triangular pattern just below where it had been dented in. It was then that Little Bill began to feel the burning streak on top of his head and explored it with his fingers. The lowest bullet had taken off some hair and a little bit of skin, because his fingers came away red. That was the one that had knocked his hat off, he guessed.

The sheriff and Big Bill looked at the hat, then at each other, then at Little Bill. It made the youngster feel kind of uncomfortable.

"He figgered I was some bigger than I am, I reckon," he said finally, when the two men just stared at him.

Big Bill's hand was tight on his shoulder. "Yeah," he said, his voice kind of husky. "Yeah."

Sheriff Tuck was mighty nice and didn't say anything about the man inside. He shook hands with Little Bill and then with Big Bill and said he'd be seeing them around, his voice mild and polite, like it always was. Then Little Bill got his horse and he and Big Bill went out of town at an easy trot, not saying anything to each other.

When they got to the edge of town and started out on the trail that short-cutted to the Double B, the sky was getting clear and there were quite a few stars looking down at them. They jogged along for a ways, the horses' hoofs making soft, thudding sounds in the night and the creak of leather sounding friendly and natural.

Finally Big Bill cleared his throat a little and then turned in the saddle and looked across at Little Bill.

"I'm powerful sorry about the pup, son," he said gently, "He was a mighty cute little feller," And then when Little Bill didn't answer right off, he added. "Them collies are a right smart breed, from all I hear. I reckon a smart dog could more'n earn his keep around a ranch. I'd kind of like to send east for another one—if it's all right with you."

"It's fine with me," Little Bill said huskily. "But I'd kind of like to wait—just a little while."

Big Bill cleared his throat again. "Sure," he agreed. He was thinking of how warm and soft that furry body had been when he picked it up in the barn. "Me, too," he added softly.

Then they rode down the trail together in silence.

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

By Robbins and Farren

Sam Regan's hotel at Ashforth, Colorado, was not only the scenic beauty spot of the whole territory, but the sole pride and joy of Regan himself. Daily, he scoured its always shining interior until the board floors were smooth as marble and the cellar was as clean as the kitchen table. It was not easy for the rough miners to gain admittance to this hostel—before any guest was allowed to cross the threshold, he had to submit to having his clothes boiled in a tank in the front yard and his naked body scrubbed from head to foot with a curry brush by the fastidious hotel keeper.

In Clarksville, Texas, in 1842, food was worth its weight in gold, and publisher Charles de Morse did not object when subscribers to his newspaper, *The Northern Standard*, said they preferred to pay in produce instead of money. He was annoyed, however, when the townsfolk hit upon the idea of paying off in rotten eggs. Finally, his patience at an end, he got out an addition with headlines a foot high that shrieked: COLUMBUS DISCOVERS AMERICA! PILGRIMS TO LAND ON PLYMOUTH ROCK! "What's the big idea?" an indignant subscriber asked. The editor shrugged and answered, "This news happened the same day those eggs you gave me were laid!"

Len Stilman, gold miner, returned to his home in Sacramento after the Civil War with a new respect for book learning. Enrolling in the third grade, the thirty-year-old veteran set out to improve his mind. But his brain matter was a little rusty and soon Len realized that he was the dunce of the class. He corraled his classmates, aged eight to twelve. "Listen, you pipsqueaks," he growled, "if a single one of you makes a higher grade than I do on the final exam, I'll —" and he left it to their imaginations. The teacher was stunned, a week later, to find that all her pupils but one had scored a flat zero. Somehow, Lennie had managed to get one-half of one answer right, and he graduated in triumph at the head of his class.

In 1870, at Laramie, Wyoming, two quarrelsome gunmen, Clay Carter and Ernest Hale, were dragged into court to be tried on charges of disturbing the peace and shooting a hole in a deputy's sombrero. Court action was nothing new to these two, nor was the institution of trial by jury. They were considerably staggered, however, when, upon entering the courtroom, they discovered the jury to be composed of all women—the first in U. S. history. They were even more amazed when the verdict was returned: "Guilty, and we recommend that the criminals be sentenced to two months at hard labor—doing the washing and ironing for all the women in Laramie!"

BOOTHILL'S BEST BRONC-BUSTER

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Shy Buckaroo

SOMETIMES horses were a help, and when the feeling wasn't too bad young Rand Allison would go down to the corrals, maybe stay a couple of hours, not talking or anything, but hearing the animals and scenting them and knowing they were there. Other nights, though, like tonight, when he got so downright miserable and lonesome he felt like a lost pup, he'd go down to the river and sit on an old live-oak log and try to figure out where he was headed and what was wrong with his life.

Usually he never knew what brought on these spells, but tonight was different. Along the river small frogs chirped while

Rand swung his lariat as Booger Red, his ears laid back, struck downward with murderous hoofs.

By BOB OBETS

a big green grand-daddy boomed in accompaniment and the moon laid its same old magic on the water. Up at the house, Buck Pardee was talking horses with Qune Briscoe, the buyer, cooking up a big deal, and Buck had asked Scott Gentry to sit in. As much as telling Gentry he was to be the Muscatel's new foreman! About now Lissie Bell would be serving them coffee, with Scott Gentry's bold eyes following her around. Scott Gentry had a habit, especially here lately, of looking at Lissie Bell as if he owned her. The thought of that and of Buck Pardee's words to him this afternoon pulled Rand to his feet. He had to look twice before he could believe it was Lissie Bell standing there.

Moonlight, filtering through the live-oak leaves, made a silver-and-shadow pattern across her face and turned her eyes mysterious and wonderful. She had on a white dress and he could see her breast heaving a little. Sight of her that way, so near and so desirable, made Rand quite dizzy and all he could think of to say was, "Lissie Bell!"

There are two ways of breaking broncs: A man could gentle them as Rand Allison did, turning them into friendly, serviceable creatures. Or he could break them as Scott Gentry did, with quirt and spur, turning them into terror-ridden killers whose smashing hoofs would strike at every mustang-busting buckaroo!

"I couldn't wait, Rand. I saw you talking to dad at the corral this evening, so I slipped off. Did you ask him, Rand? Rand, what did he say?"

That brought the whole thing back to him. His high hopes, his fine plans. All the dreams he had dreamed for Lissie Bell and him, blasted by Buck Pardee's stubborn words.

He still couldn't understand it. Those horses down on the Huachuca were running wild, no market for them. So he had rustled a market. He had got the remount officer at Ringgold Barracks to promise to buy a hundred head if the animals stood up to inspection. He hadn't asked any favors. The price hereabouts for breaking a horse was ten dollars. He would have to catch up those horses and break them gentle and then train them. He had offered to do all that for ten dollars a round, horses to pass inspection or no pay. And Buck had turned him down flat!

After that he hadn't gone into the rest of it. Buck owned three thousand acres on the Huachuca, good curly mesquite grass with the creek running through—a perfect horse heaven, if a man ever saw one. Range which Buck didn't need. With the thousand dollars for shaping up those horses, put with the few hundred he'd saved, a man could make a nice down payment on the land and have a bit left over to start stocking it with. He'd planned to build the house himself, on a knoll overlooking the creek. He'd planned to take Lissie Bell there, and just thinking about it now, remembering Buck's words and all the things those words had snatched from him, brought a longing so intense that it hurt deep inside him.

With this feeling coloring his words, he said, "What did he say? Why, you know Buck. He's got a young stallion in the corral he wants me to break. He's a beauty, too, except for an old wire cut that left a scar on his throat. Buck wants him for his Sunday horse. Figures to go fiddle-footin' past old Joe Tom Crawford and make him turn plumb green. Much as I could figure out, breakin' that stallion is about as far as Buck's plans go for me."

"Rand! Oh, no, Rand! He couldn't!" A quick step brought her almost against him, and she caught his arms.

"More than that," Rand said, and the knowledge that what he had to say would hurt her roughened his voice. "Buck turned me down cold; then he had to tack on something I haven't plumb savvied yet. He said he never trusted a horse or a man, either, that was afraid of himself and always spookin' at shadows. Finished up by tellin' me that no forty-a-month cowpuncher would ever marry his daughter, and he didn't forget to paw and beller. It was plain enough, that part, without the cussin'!"

"Rand! He didn't mean that! He couldn't! Nothing can come between us!" He was watching her face and saw tears brighten her eyes.

He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her no, that nothing ever could. But the memory of Buck Pardee's words already lay between them, and now that memory turned him almost savage.

"If that's the kind of son-in-law Buck wants, I better go strap on dad's old gun! When Gentry gets that foreman's job, he'll be so big-headed I'll probably have to use it. I ought to know how. I had Cole and Yance and dad all three to teach me. Guns! That's all I've heard since I was big enough to walk."

"And now," she said softly, "your father and both your brothers are dead. I don't want you killed, Rand. I couldn't bear it. There has to be some other way."

"There will be," he told her, "if you'll just keep faith in me. Remember how men used to talk about the Fighting Allisons, and the gun-magic in their hands? Well, I've got a sort of magic in my hands too, Lissie Bell. It's a magic with horses, and I'm going to use it, some day, to build us a ranch and a home!"

"Ah, Rand," she said huskily. "I love you so. Sometimes it hurts me inside, Rand."

She moved closer and she was looking at him with a poignant yearning that made her lips tremble and spilled like moonlight from her eyes. His arms reached for her and pulled her hard against him, and in that moment he could not hear the footsteps approaching.

RAND had never put in with those who claimed that old Buck Pardee was the most cantankerous man between the Frio

and the Nueces. In a way, Buck had been right good to him. Because Buck had fought for his possessions—some said with a running iron in one hand and a wide loop in the other—he always had admired Dan Allison and, to a lesser degree, Cole and Yance. So when the Fighting Allisons had got killed off that way, Dan and Cole in the Ranger service and Yance wearing the badge of a U. S. deputy marshal, one following the other and each dying with his boots on and his gun in hand, victims of "lead poisoning," old Buck Pardee had saddled up and gone to town and fetched Rand home with him. The Muscatel had been his home ever since.

That had been four years ago, and in all that time Rand never had packed a six-shooter. But it came to him now, as a violent hand yanked him around, that a gun on his thigh might be a comfort. The squinted eyes of Buck Pardee were murderous!

"Go to the house, Lissie Bell," he ordered in a voice that trembled. "I'll tend to you later. Slippin' out here, lallygaggin' with him like a cross-bred pup!"

"I won't!" Lissie Bell cried. And when such open and vehement defiance seemed to shake Buck a little, she slipped between the two men, and her head was up and proud. "We love each other, and if we have to meet this way, it's your fault! You won't give Rand a chance. You never considered him for the foreman's job. You turned him down on breaking those horses out of pure spite and stubbornness. But I'm going to marry him anyway, if he'll have me!"

Then a single woe-freighted sob came from her throat with such an agony of feeling that it left her shoulders shaking, though no further sound escaped from her lips.

Old Buck patted her shoulder with an awkward hand. "There, there, Lissie. I never knew you felt thisaway." Across her bowed head he glared at Rand.

At that moment, unfortunately for Scott Gentry, he and Qune Briscoe, the horse buyer, came riding up.

"Excuse me, Buck. But Qune wants to know who'll handle the breakin' of them—"

That was as far as Scott Gentry got. His red-flecked eyes had taken all this scene in, and when Buck looked around, Scott Gentry coughed and put a hand over his mouth, not quite in time to hide its smile. The prongs of old Buck's mustache began to quiver.

"The breaking?" Buck said, almost whispering, so delicate was his tone. "Why, you will, you pussy-faced dunderhead!" he roared in a voice that carried at least to the ranch house. "And I hope them broncs break your damned back! Now, git outta my sight!"

Scott Gentry didn't move. For a time it looked as though when he did move, it would be to jump from the saddle on top of old Buck. Rand saw his big right hand clench. Then he made a swallowing sound.

"All right, Buck. But Qune's the buyer. Besides, you mentioned me takin' that foreman's job."

"Did I?" Buck growled. "I forgot."

He reached up and scratched his ear. Then he grinned like a wicked old wolf.

"Scott, you and Rand git ready to pull out for the Huachuca before daybreak. You'll be in charge."

"Not over me," Rand said flatly. "Not now nor any time."

Qune Briscoe, who was a short, fat, flaccid man, with eyes sharp and glowing as two black coals, wheedled, "Now, Buck, let Rand shape up those horses for me."

Buck scratched his other ear. Then he was grinning again.

"You two fellers git set to pull out. Take that black stallion with you. You'll break him, Rand, and do it nice and easy. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for him! As to who's in charge, you can cut high card, spit at a crack, or settle it with six-shooters. I don't care who's boss, so long as I git my horses broke and you handle that stallion right."

He caught Lissie Bell's arm then, and said, "Just like I don't care who's my new foreman—if he's man enough to handle the job!" and headed her toward the house.

Scott Gentry was watching Rand, his lips pulled into a smile half sardonic, half mocking.

"So it's you and me, Rand. How you want to settle it? With bowie knives and a bandana between our teeth, or would you rather draw straws for it?"

"We'll shoot it out with sawed-off shotguns, if you want it that way," Rand said

evenly. He was still staring at Scott Gentry when Gentry laughed and nodded to Qune Briscoe and they rode away.

CHAPTER TWO

The Challenge

THEY unhitched the wagon mules just south of the old pack-pole corrals on Huachuca Creek. They tossed their bedrolls under the wagon, let down the chuckbox cover, and they had made camp.

"Well," said Scott Gentry.

"With shotguns?" said Rand.

Those were the first words spoken since they had left the ranch house.

"We've got two weeks," said Gentry. "Forty head to break."

"Besides the stallion," Rand said. "Be better if we worked as a team."

Scott Gentry's thin lips curled, but not in a smile. "You take my orders, Rand, and we'll do that very thing."

In Rand's eyes, staring at Gentry, something swirled like gray powdersmoke. "Whenever I take your orders, Gentry," he said softly, "the rabbits will be beddin' up with the coons."

That was their last conversation for a week. They worked the sun up and they worked it down, for time was precious, and the same thoughts drove each of them: Next to his morning's toddy and a good horse, old Buck Pardee swore by a man who knew how to handle horses. It wasn't too farfetched to think that Buck might use this breaking job as a yardstick by which to measure his new foreman. The man who got the job as foreman of the Muscatel would be sitting pretty—pretty enough, say, to win Lissie Bell for a wife.

So when a big red-eyed sorrel slammed Rand against the corral poles, he rubbed some coal oil on his injured leg, set his teeth and climbed back into saddle. When a barrel-chested brown threw Scott Gentry and almost broke his arm, he took a long pull from the snake-bite jug, cursed the beast until he gave out of breath, then took him on for a second round. If Gentry, as the long, dusty days wore by, broke more horses than Rand, it wasn't because Gentry worked any harder. It was because his rough, hurry-up method was entirely different from the procedure Rand used.

They worked in adjoining mesquite-pole pens. Gentry would take one horse at a time, snub it to the stout post in the middle of the corral, slap on the hull and ride until the brute quit bucking. If the horse objected too strenuously to wearing leather, rather than bother with tying him until the gear could be strapped on, Gentry would bat him between the eyes with the heavy end of a whip, not viciously but just hard enough to dizzy the animal. This didn't leave much of a mark, and it usually was effective.

Rand's way was to work with several horses at once. The first day he would put a saddle in the pen for the horses to see and to muzzle, and all the while he would be walking around them, talking to them and tossing his rope until finally they lost all fear of the snaky thing. Next, the animals took turn wearing the saddle, and not until each one was familiar with the weight and the feel of the thing would Rand do any riding. Even so, the wild horses did some bucking, usually quite a bit of it, but they came through the ordeal without any lasting fears or grudges against mankind.

Rand didn't mind the days, but the nights were pretty bad. For almost every night after supper, Gentry would ride the six miles to the Pardee ranch house, and what he did there Rand could only imagine. Usually Gentry wouldn't return until around midnight. And Rand didn't like the triumphant smile on Gentry's face as he rode into the makeshift camp.

"She must want him there, else he wouldn't keep going," Rand decided glumly. But there was a stubbornness in him that wouldn't let him ride over to the ranch house. Buck Pardee's words still rankled, and Rand told himself that if a man had to strap on a gun and go swaggering around shooting folks, and maybe getting himself shot just to prove he was a man, then Buck could think what he pleased.

He still remembered the night the news came about Yance, and when the word came about Cole. He still remembered that sweltering day in Carrizo, the flat slamming of the .45's, and his father, Dan, pitching forward into the white caliche dust. He knew he would never forget those things. He was the last Allison left, but he guessed he wasn't a Fighting Allison. . . .

JUST thinking about Lissie Bell made him lonesome. The nights were bright with moonlight and he could imagine her with Scott Gentry on the ranch-house porch. Partly to take his mind off his miseries, he took to strolling down the creek with his saddle gun. Beside a cow trail that led to the creek, he had found the partly-eaten carcass of a young colt. The killer had left his calling cards in the mud of the creek bank—the marks of padded feet, big as the horn of a Mexican saddle. Rand spent long hours up in a mesquite that overlooked the trail, but all he received for his trouble was a lacerated skin. That cat, he decided, was too smart for him. But his dander was up and he kept going back, night after night.

By the end of the first week, Scott Gentry had broken twelve horses to Rand's eight, but Rand had spent a lot of time working with Buck's black stallion. Buck rode out a couple of times to see how the breaking was coming on. He never failed to ask questions about the stallion. He wanted to know when Rand was going to ride him, if he was rubbing plenty of sweet oil on the scar, if he thought the animal had bottom to him. Old Joe Tom Crawford, Buck declared, was going to turn so green he'd look like a bullfrog in a lily pond.

There wasn't much to Rand's first ride on the stallion; the rough part of it lasted only a couple of minutes. Yet, for the first time in days, Rand was honestly happy. After the stallion quit bucking, Rand rode him around the corral, and all his poignant imaginings of Lissie Bell and Scott Gentry, all his crumbled dreamings of a ranch and a home under the live oaks, slipped from his mind. You spent patient hours; you moved around him and you talked to him; you handled him until finally you gained his confidence. Then you rode him! This was something a man could tie to. A good horse would never let you down. Rand felt like shouting.

The work went on. A constant cloud of dust hung over the breaking corrals, and Scott Gentry wore a groove in the trail making his nightly rides to the ranch house. It was the sixth night of the second week when Gentry returned to camp just as Rand was fixing to roll in. Rand was a bit excited because he had caught a glimpse of the catamount, but sight of Gentry's faintly mocking, faintly triumphant smile was enough to extinguish his pleasant glow, even before the man spoke.

"Better scrape them whiskers off tomorrow, feller."

"Why?" said Rand. "They don't itch."

"Because Lissie Bell and the old man's coming out." Gentry smiled as if that happening held a special meaning for him.

Rand grunted.

Rand was in his blankets when Gentry said, "Old man asked how the work was coming. I told him. Fifteen broncs for you, twenty-one for me."

"Unh. . . ."

"Like to ask your advice—you know the Huachuca country pretty well. Me, I sorta favor that rise overlookin' the creek, for a ranch house. Lissie, she—"

Rand's snore was convincing.

THAT night the cougar killed another colt. Rand found the carcass, what was left of it, when he rode down to the horse trap where, earlier in the week, two of the Muscatel vaqueros had penned the horses old Buck wanted broken. Hazing before him the three broncs he intended to work with that day, Rand rode back to camp more determined than ever to kill the tawny Mexican cat.

Inside one of the round breaking-pens dust was boiling, hoofs hammering, almost a thousand pounds of enraged horse squealing to the sky. Scott Gentry was making his second ride on a big sorrel he had named Booger Red, and the Booger wasn't liking it at all. Rand penned the three horses and was in time to see Gentry's black sombrero, with Gentry under it, describe a slow, magnificent arch, then drop behind the mesquite poles like a falling star. Rand started to grin. Then suddenly he yelled, while Scott Gentry rolled over and over, frantically. Booger Red, his ears laid back, struck downward with murderous hoofs.

Rand left saddle and was across the fence in a single movement. He had his lariat in his hand, and he swung the leather coils full in the sorrel's face.

Scott Gentry was up the corral fence like a squirrel. There, he mopped his face with a bandana and cursed. He cursed the sorrel for a lowdown killer. He cursed Buck

Pardee for owning such a brute. He started in on Rand.

"If you'd been here helpin', instead—"

"Gentry, take my advice," Rand cut in coldly. "Don't ever club a horse. Anyway, not like you did Booger Red yesterday."

"Why, listen here, you!" Scott Gentry jumped down, raging. Then a wicked gleam came in his eyes.

He got his saddle rope and used it to snub the sorrel to the post in the middle of the corral. Beginning to smile, he picked up a length of stout mesquite that had been knocked from the fence. He struck the sorrel a single vicious blow before Rand grabbed his arm and hauled him around.

"Put down that club, Gentry," Rand said. Gentry's lips skinned back to show his white teeth, and he was raising the club when Booger Red took charge of the situation.

The snubbing rope allowed the sorrel just enough slack. He reared and struck with his forefeet. The edge of one iron-hard hoof hit the side of Gentry's head, and before Rand could so much as yell a warning, Gentry was down in the dust again.

Strangely enough, Gentry blamed Rand. The blow had been a glancing one, leaving Gentry a bit dazed but not even cutting through his scalp. Rand dragged him away from the enraged sorrel, and by the time Gentry could get to his feet, Rand had hazed the sorrel into the adjoining corral. As Rand came back through the connecting gate, Gentry turned away from the fence, where he had hung his shell belt and holstered gun. He buckled the belt in place and carefully tied the leather thongs that held the holster tip snug against his thigh. Not until then did he look at Rand, and his red-flecked eyes were ugly. He crossed to within arm's length of Rand, and spoke through his teeth.

"Allison, you've meddled in my business once too often. This range ain't big enough for the two of us. If that's not plain, I'll make it plainer."

From over by the fence came a little choked sound, but both men held stone still, staring at each other. The voice of Buck Pardee broke the silence.

"Rand, no man who works for me can pass that up."

Rand didn't look at him. He kept watching the flat shine of Scott Gentry's eyes. He said, "I guess it was plain enough, Gentry." He stepped past the man, toward the gate. A few minutes later, in the adjoining pen, he was talking in a low voice as he tightened the cinch strap on a promising young bay.

"Easy, boy. You know it won't hurt you. Easy, now."

He never looked at Lissie Bell. He knew she was there beside old Buck, but he wouldn't let himself look at her. A few minutes later, she and Buck rode away.

Rand stayed at the corral till dark. He finished with the bay, then worked awhile with Buck's stallion, not forgetting to rub some sweet oil on the scar that faintly marred the glossy black throat. By the time he was finished, Scott Gentry had ridden away toward the ranch house, and Rand didn't know whether to be glad or sorry.

CHAPTER THREE

Bait for a Showdown

THAT night Rand couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about Scott Gentry and Lissie Bell. He kept remembering Dan, down on his face in the white caliche dust. Finally, he got up and slid his saddle gun from its boot and went down the creek. He was up in the mesquite, wondering where he was headed and what he ought to do about Scott Gentry, when he saw the yellow-green eyes moving through the brush toward him. . . .

* * *

He had the beast skinned out and was in camp, rolling the pelt so that he could cache it in a tree, when Gentry came riding back. Gentry's dun, catching the cougar scent, acted up a bit, rearing and fiddle-footing until Gentry yanked on the reins and said, "Behave, damn you!" Gentry was too sore at Rand to ask any questions, but as he rode on toward the corrals he called back over his shoulder, "Like to buy that pelt for Lissie Bell. Make her a nice rug for the house."

Rand didn't sleep much that night; nor for that matter did Gentry. Rand heard him up once, heard a tin cup rattle against the water bucket. Rand kept thinking about tomorrow, wondering if Lissie Bell would come out with Buck and Qune Briscoe, the horse buyer.

Lissie Bell had on a new dress. She perched herself on the corral fence with Buck and Qune Briscoe, and there was a high color in her cheeks, a sparkle in her eyes. She told Scott Gentry, when he admired her dress, that she had bought it for the dance at the schoolhouse that night. She wouldn't even look at Rand; but once or twice he caught old Buck watching him, and he thought there was something like anger in Buck's squinty eyes. Well, he guessed he knew how Buck felt—and Lissie Bell, too. They thought he was something less than a man. They thought he was a disgrace to the name of the Fighting Allisons, and maybe he was. But he wasn't afraid of Scott Gentry. It was just that he had seen what happened to men who lived by the gun. It was just that he kept remembering Cole and Yance and Dan, down in the forgotten dust. . . .

Scott Gentry showed his string first, riding the horses in the pen one after the other, with Rand helping with the saddling. Gentry was a top rider, but several of the horses acted up, causing sharp-eyed Qune Briscoe to shake his head. Finally, though, the buyer said, "Reckon I'll take this bunch. But they're pretty rough."

"Pretty smooth, I'd say—for twenty-four broncs in two weeks," Gentry declared, glancing at Lissie Bell. He turned the horses out in the trap, then climbed up beside the girl. His eyes, watching Rand, held a mocking insolence. "All right, Allison. Show us your sixteen."

"Seventeen," said Rand, "countin' the stallion."

Buck's stallion, of course, was not for sale, but he was the gentlest horse in the bunch, and Rand had decided to ride him first. To catch up a horse Rand always used a braided leather lariat, instead of a hemp rope, because the leather wasn't so likely to burn an animal. As he hazed the stallion into the pen Gentry had used, he had the lariat in his hand. No matter, he was thinking, what opinion Buck had of him, Buck ought to be pleased. The stallion really had been broken right. Rand approached the big black with confidence, softly talking to him.

He was a little surprised when the stallion snorted and shied away from him. Wasn't used to so many people, Rand guessed. He tossed the lariat with an easy underhand motion, and the loop settled over the stallion's head. The rest of it Rand never liked to remember.

For as the loop settled, the stallion reared. He pawed with his forefeet, and screamed as if in pure terror. He jerked the lariat from Rand's hands, almost jerking him off his feet, and went around the corral with his nostrils flared and his head tossing. The animals in the adjoining pen took up the stallion's fear, and soon the whole bunch were milling and snorting and kicking up dust.

Finally the stallion fought his head free of the noose and stood against the fence, muscles quivering. He even allowed Rand to get close to him. Then, without warning, he went up on his haunches and struck with both forefeet. Rand's left shoulder went numb. He didn't realize he was flat in the dust until he heard Gentry's shout.

"Get out, you fool!" Gentry yelled, and both he and old Buck jumped down inside the corral.

But there was no need for that. Rand was on his feet, his grin a sickly thing to see. He shook his head.

"I can't savvy it. Yesterday, he was gentle as a kitten."

"Like to have seen it," Buck snarled. "By God, you've plumb ruined that horse!"

Scott Gentry smiled as he watched Rand gather up his lariat.

With Gentry's help, Rand finally managed to screw the gear on a young bay. He even managed to ride the beast. But it was a wild, rough minute or so that Rand spent, for the bay was excited, and when Rand stepped down, Qune Briscoe was shaking his head.

"I seen enough, Buck. I'll take them twenty-four Scott roughed out, and look elsewhere for the rest."

"Don't blame you, Qune," old Buck growled. "I promised you broke horses, and I sure hate to go back on my word. But that stallion—I bragged so much about him I'll be the laughing stock of the country!"

He glared at Rand. "Bring the wagon on to the house. I'll have your time check ready. Scott, you better stay till the men come for Qune's horses. Talk to you tonight about that foreman's job. Come along, Lissie."

She gave Rand one long searching look, in her eyes a deep scorn and a deeper re-

gret. Then she turned and followed Buck and Qune Briscoe. Scott Gentry lingered for a moment.

"Remember, fella," he said softly. "Don't let me have to tell you twice." He turned and called, "Hold on a moment, Lissie," and went away, leaving with Rand the memory of the mocking triumph that leaped in his eyes.

RAND, left standing alone in the middle of the corral, was too numbed to analyze his feelings. He had lost his job. He had lost Lissie Bell. All his dreams for the future had come crashing down around him. But the stallion—that was what lingered like a burr in his mind.

A man spent a lifetime working with horses, studying them, loving them, until finally he came to realize that right there, in horses, lay his whole future. He even got a little proud of his knowledge. But now—

Rand shook his head. "That stallion is an honest horse," he muttered. "I'd stake my life on it. There's something sure funny. He acted like—"

He stopped to gather up his lariat. Suddenly he stared, gave a low exclamation. He tossed the coiled lariat over a corral post, and went running toward a big mesquite near the wagon. He and Gentry used that mesquite to hang their saddles and gear on; it had shaded their water bucket, and in its forks they had cached a side of bacon and other things. Rand took one look, then started back to the corrals, then stopped. His warbag was slung over a limb of the mesquite, and from it he took a well-oiled shell belt and a holster that held a black-handled .45. These things had belonged to Dan Allison, one of the Fighting Allisons. It was surprising how comfortable the gun felt against Rand's thigh.

The horses had quieted somewhat by the time Rand got back to them, though the stallion was still uneasy. Rand didn't bother with the lariat or a rope. He approached the stallion, talking gently, holding only his bridle.

The stallion backed to the fence and stood quivering. There was one tense moment when Rand thought the stallion would bolt. Then he had slipped on the bridle, and that was about all there was to it.

Rand rode the stallion bareback; then he rode two or three of the other horses. Deep inside him was a voice that wanted to shout: "I knew it! I might not know a lot of things, but I still know horses!"

From the gate behind him a growling voice said, "I couldn't savvy it, can't yet. Thought maybe I'd better try that stallion myself. That's why I came back."

Rand turned to see Buck Pardee stepping inside the corral. Behind him came Qune Briscoe, Lissie Bell, and a sullen-faced Scott Gentry.

Rand addressed the horse buyer. "Any other you'd like rode?"

"Try that bay," said Briscoe.

Rand rode the bay.

As he stepped down, Scott Gentry said, "After all—two weeks, and sixteen horses."

"Seventeen," said Rand. "Don't forget the stallion. And that reminds me, Gentry. . . ."

Rand took the lariat off the post. "You're a fair rope-hand, Gentry. Be no trick at all for you to rope that stallion. Try it, Gentry." He held out the lariat.

"Say!" Gentry blustered. "You tryin' to make a fool of me?"

"Go ahead, Gentry," old Buck spoke up. "I'm gettin' right curious."

Gentry had to do it, but it was plain enough that he didn't want to. He seemed awkward, missed the stallion completely on his first toss. He muttered, "Well, what the hell!" and he flipped the loop and when the stallion wheeled away, gave the lariat a little extra wrist-jerk that sent the loop unerringly over the black head.

What followed was almost a repetition of the stallion's earlier performance. He screamed, reared, yanked the lariat free from Gentry's hands and gave every evidence of utmost terror. Gentry kept clear of him. The man's eyes, as he turned to face Rand, were murderous.

"You broke him," he snarled. "He's a one-man horse."

"No," said Rand steadily. "You know what's wrong with him, Gentry. A man that'd pull a lowdown trick like that on a bunch of horses just ain't worth livin'."

"Hold on, now, you fellers," put in Buck Pardee. "S'posin' one of you fellers does some explainin'."

Rand was watching Scott Gentry. When Gentry only scowled, Rand said, "All right, Buck, you know horses. What would you

say is their keenest sense, sight, hearin', or scent?"

"We-ll, maybe their scent," Buck said after thinking a moment.

"Right, Buck. And how about their memories?"

"Long," said Buck. "But I don't understand—"

"Right, again," Rand said. "Once one gets mistreated or scared, he's not likely to forget. Buck, you see that scar on the stallion's neck? My guess is, it's not any wire cut. Likely it was made by a cougar. Anyhow—"

"Man, get on with it!" Buck pleaded angrily.

"I'm gettin'—right to the point where I killed the cougar. Yep, that's right. Killed him last night. Took his pelt and put it in a tree. Gentry, here, saw where I put it. I just looked, and somebody unrolled that pelt, then rolled it back up again, hair side out. And I heard Gentry movin' around camp last night. That far enough, Buck?"

"Confound you, go on!"

"Well, today after you all left, I got to thinkin'. I've seen horses catch cougar scent, saw Gentry's dun last night. But I'd bathed good with soap and changed clothes, and it wasn't on my gear because Coaly would have acted up when I saddled him. So it had to be on the one thing I wouldn't use till I set out to show you my horses, and which I'd be dead sure to use then."

Rand was still watching Scott Gentry. "That's where I found the cougar hairs, Gentry. Just a few that had stuck in the braids of my lariat when you rubbed it with that fresh pelt."

"Why, you low-down, four-legged—git outta my camp!" old Buck roared. He caught up the length of mesquite which Gentry had used on the sorrel, Booger Red. "Go on! Git, before I forgit myself and plumb beat your brains—"

IT WAS then that Gentry went for his gun. His hand clawed in a desperate grab, and he was staring at Rand, his lean-lipped face contorted from the feeling surging through him.

Rand's hand must have moved, too. For suddenly he stood with the black-butted Colt, the weapon that had belonged to Dan Allison, shoved out before him. Scott Gentry stopped his draw as if his arm had turned to ice. He stared at Rand, almost unbelieving, and then he croaked, "Damn you, you're just like the rest of them Fighting Allisons. Chain-lightnin' with a gun." He let his own weapon chug back into its holster.

"No, Gentry," Rand said in a voice almost gentle, "I'm not like the rest of the Allisons. They believed in living by the gun; I believe in using one only when it's pushed on me. Only when I've got something worth fighting for. I hate to use a gun so bad that I almost lost the most valuable thing I ever owned. Gentry, you'd better go."

Gentry hesitated. He looked at Lissie Bell, who had come to stand beside old Buck, and his eyes were pleading. He looked at Buck and he said, "A man's entitled to one mistake. What about that foreman's job? What about all the work I've put in breaking those—?"

"A man's entitled to one mistake, all right," Buck cut in coldly. "But he ain't entitled to pull any sneakin' trick like you tried, Gentry. You'd better go now. You'd better keep on going."

Gentry turned, slowly, like an old man. He stumbled a little as he went through the corral gate.

Old Buck Pardee got out a bandana and blew his nose, violently. His hand half-lifted toward Rand. He said, "Son, I—I thought you was skeered of him. I thought a heap of yo' daddy and yo' brothers, but I thought you— How can I make it up to you? How would you like that foreman's job?"

Rand was watching Lissie Bell. He was thinking of having her, in their own house, on their own place; and perhaps she read his thoughts. She said, "Rand made you a proposition, dad. You've got more horses here, and Rand can break them. The remount man will still buy them. We want to be independent. We want to make our own start, have our own home, not be dependent on anyone.

"But—" old Buck said. He snorted. "All right." Then a thought struck him that made him slap his thigh. "Won't old Joe Tom's eyes bug out when he sees me on that stallion!"

THE END

THE THREE-CORNERED WAR

By STONE CODY

"When you're born dumb, it's for a long time, ain't it?" Soapy said.

Ed Dunn rode into Garford Crossing packing with him two feud-busting items: a bone-handled .45, with bullets dedicated to town-boss Ace Caraway, and a war-sack full of dynamite with which he aimed to blow to Hell trigger-quick townsmen, vengeful nesters, and the whole damned useless three-cornered war!

ED DUNN carried his saddlebags from the livery barn to the hotel. It was Saturday afternoon and the main street of Garford Crossing was crowded. But the crowd was too quiet. Dunn felt eyes on him, curious, suspicious, probing. Nobody spoke to him, though, and after the third man had turned his eyes away, too quickly, instead of returning his easy casual nod, he shrugged and made no further efforts to be friendly.

He didn't like the feel of this town. It made him uneasy, but none of the uneasiness showed in his manner. He appeared casual, unaware, as he made his way past the groups along the boardwalk—a tall, easy man in range clothes, with a wide pleasant mouth and gray eyes that looked ready to smile, in odd contrast to the flat, hard planes of his face, the jut of a predatory nose and a jaw with a distinct hint of granite about it.

A man sat in a rocking chair on the porch of the hotel, not speaking to Dunn either, though he had the look of a friendly man. He was dressed as a prosperous rancher or banker might be, in a black coat that revealed a modestly embroidered vest and black handsome boots setting off dark cloth pants. His face tended to be plump, fresh-colored and benign. A cigar protruded from one corner of his mouth.

As Dunn passed the man spread five plump fingers on the arm of his chair, doubled them up and returned four of them, the thumb now concealed.

Dunn went in and asked about rates by the week from a clerk with a downy growth of new beard and uneasy eyes. He was given the key to number five and went up and put his saddle bags carefully in a corner by the bed. Then he walked quietly down the hall to the door of number nine, opened it and went in.

He kept back from the window and went first to one wall and then the other, listening intently. As far as he could determine, the rooms on either side were unoccupied.

AFTER a little the man who had been on the porch came in. He saw Ed Dunn standing back in a corner, grinned and went to the window, pulling down the blind.

Ed said, "Well?"

The man shrugged, still smiling. "Good and bad," he murmured. "The bank safe will open like a can of beans. But the town is bad. Galoot called Ace Caraway, gambler and saloon owner, is the big auger. He took over one of the big spreads about a year ago, had the cow king killed in a forced fight and squeezed the widder out. Since then, he's been working up trouble with the sodbusters adjoinin' him. Range hawg. Aims to have it all." He shrugged again. "Usual thing. But the trouble's about to come to a head. Town is thick with Caraway's gunnies. Everybody jumpy as a cat in a street full of dawgs. I been thinkin' it might be better to wait until she busts. Give us a better chance."

"So that's it," Dunn said slowly. "The town showed it plain enough—like fleas on one of them Mex hairless pups." He grinned suddenly. "You know, Soapy, every time I meet up with one of these range hawgs it makes me think of lean. hungry boars like you an' me. Seems like we sure picked a poor country to root in. Reckon we just ain't smart."

Soapy Bellew smiled at him affectionately. "When you're born dumb, it's for a long time, ain't it?" His plump lips hardened. "Me, I like better to sleep with a easy conscience. Take from the rich an' spend 'till you're poor. That's my motto. But we got nothin' to do—"

He broke off as a snarl of angry voices burst up from the street, followed by the sound of a blow.

They went to the window carefully, each at his side of the blind. What they saw was not a fight, but a beating. The man who was taking it was a stringy, clumsy-looking blond man with a bewildered looking face which was rapidly being cut into raw meat. His jeans with galluses and his flat-heeled boots proclaimed him a homesteader.

It was the man who was administering the beating who interested Ed Dunn. He had a face like scarred rock. The slitted cruelty of his eyes matched the thin snarling crack of his mouth. He was rangily built with powerful sloping shoulders and curiously large hands and wrists. The wrists were thick, big-boned and muscled, and Dunn knew that the terrific shocking power of the man's blows came as much from them as from the drive of his shoulders.

The blond man went down for the third time and for the third time, the rock-faced man jerked him to his feet, snarling, "Stand up and fight."

The homesteader stood, staggering, not even raising his hands now, standing because in some dim way the command to stand had penetrated through the wall of unconsciousness which enclosed his battered brains. Both eyes were closed. His nose was smashed and gushing blood. His lips were shredded strips of bleeding flesh. Two enormous blue bruises puffed out from his temples.

Dunn felt the iron tips of his fingers driving into his palms. Wasn't there anyone in this whole town who would stop a thing like that? His eyes flicked around the circle of homesteaders who had gathered, saw their faces, strained, panting, white with fury or sickened gray with fear. But there were also the waiting groups of obvious gunmen, Caraway's men, who stood hard-faced and threatening, their hands ready and their eyes hot and eager and waiting.

"No marshal here?" he asked, tight-lipped, of Bellew.

"Looking for Injun sign at the other end of town," Bellew's murmur came back to him. "Belongs to Caraway—bounces when the Big Auger spits."

As they spoke, the rock-faced man measured his victim and managed to hit him three times before he fell. It was twice too many. The man was out now, dead to the world. He hadn't been knocked out by a blow to the jaw or the solar plexus either. His face and head had been battered so that he was wholly unconscious.

Ed Dunn wondered whether a man could survive a beating like that.

The rock-faced man, meanwhile, attempted to jerk the other to his feet, but it was useless. Savagely then he kicked the unconscious man in the ribs and groin.

Ed Dunn reached for his gun, but Bellew's plump hands were fast enough for a draw which had not been meant to be fast.

"No, Ed!"

Anger lay white along Dunn's cheeks and around the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"Soapy, take your hands off me."

"You're too late, Ed. Don't throw away everything for nothing. If these hombres haven't got the guts to fight their own fight—"

As he spoke, the rock-faced man reached down and pulled the homesteader to his feet, holding him upright with one rock-like fist twisted in his shirt, measured him and hit him between the eyes with a blow like the savage smash of a cannon ball.

As he struck, a woman's scream ripped through the late afternoon air and a frenzied wife in a faded cotton print, with a white face in which the screaming mouth stood out like a dark, twisted hole, fought her way through the crowd.

"Ben, Ben, Ben!" she screamed. "What have they done to you?" She was cradling the man's bloodied head in her bosom, her face bent to his, her straggly blonde hair dipped in the blood that oozed from him.

The rock-faced man pulled her to her feet. "Go on to your wagon," he said brutally. Then he nodded to a couple of the men at his side. "Pick him up and throw him in," he said curtly.

Dunn saw that his face, which had been avid with a kind of brutal lust, had turned indifferent, though somewhere in his bloodshot gaze lurked a kind of lackluster satiety.

A new voice spoke then, and Dunn stiffened.

"You brute! You horrible brute! You're worse than a snake! You're worse than a sheep-killin' wolverine, Slag Becker! I saw what you did. You—you murderer!"

The rock-faced man faced her. "Better keep out of men's business, Honey," he said. "Go on back and tell your old man he better pull out if he knows what's good for him." Then he added, an appreciative note in his voice, "Tell him to pull out an' leave you here. Somebody might take care of you."

The girl stared at him. "I wish I were a man," she raged. "I'd kill you."

Slag Becker laughed, his voice thick, and turned away.

SOAPY BELLEW said, "Some filly." His voice sounded nervous. His eyes were bloodshot and nervous and his voice was not quite steady.

Ed Dunn looked at him somberly. "Keep your mouth off of her," he said.

Bellew looked at him, surprise showing on his face. "You fall for 'em fast, don't you?" he said, and turned away from the street and sat on the bed.

He looked gray and shaken suddenly.

Ed Dunn looked at him and his eyes had affection and compassion in them.

"You ought to have let me kill him, Soapy," he said gently.

Bellew came suddenly to himself. "We'd have been cut down ourselves. And for what? For what? Show some sense," he snarled.

Ed Dunn sat down in the one straight chair. He pulled out his sixgun and looked at it attentively. Then he tossed it whirling up in the air, so that it nearly grazed the ceiling, caught it and returned it to its leather in one smooth movement. When it

was seated, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a sack of tobacco and papers and with his left hand rolled a quirly.

Soapy Bellew looked at him suspiciously.

"Cut it out," he said between his teeth.

Dunn pulled in a long draft of smoke and let it dribble out past his lips and through his nostrils.

"Looks like these sodbusters could use a hand," he said lazily.

"Cut it out," Bellew said savagely. "We seen enough of this, ain't we. It don't have anythin' to do with us."

His eyes narrowed suddenly. "It's because of that skirt. Every time you see one—"

Dunn's eyes cut him off. "I thought I told you to forget that," he said with spurious gentleness.

Bellew spread his hands and shrugged. "Whatever you say, Ed. But this range war is none of ours."

Dunn grinned at him. "Mebbe we could combine business and pleasure."

Bellew's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Dunn lifted a shoulder. "I don't like waiting for things to break. Let's make our own breaks. These sodbusters have had a scare throwed into 'em. Mebbeso they ain't honin' for no war. We might kind of encourage 'em some."

Bellew's eyes sparkled and he relaxed, visibly. "Son," he said, "You an' me's been pardners for some time. We're wanted in Tucson. We shore ain't welcome in Santa Fe. An' I could name you a dozen places where we're regarded with feelin's that ain't, as the feller says, mixed. I'd sure admire to add this place an' this bank to the list o' places where we ain't wanted and are wanted, so to speak. But you had me worried. You git too mad, Ed. An' you sure are a sucker for a ski—" he broke off and looked apologetic.

Ed Dunn went down into the street, and the first one he saw was the girl.

Her face went pale and her eyes, dark and ardent, went wide. "Ed!" She breathed. "Ed Dunn!"

The way she looked at him put a hurt and a want inside him.

She came close to him and it was as though she had opened her arms to him.

He stood there, feeling the old, forgotten surge of feeling for her go through him.

"Ed—Ed! What are you doing here, Ed?"

Dunn's fingers bit into his palms, relaxed. "Just driftin' through, Honey. No special purpose."

"But you're here," she said gently, urgently. "Have you forgotten, Ed?"

He could feel the magnetism, the breath, the scent of her thoughout him.

"I haven't forgotten anything," he said curtly. "But it's still like it always was."

"Do you know what shape we're in here?"

"I can kind of guess."

"Will you help us?"

"I thought I told you long ago that I only help myself."

He could see the hurt go into her, and the knowledge that he had hurt her so, as of old, put a hardness in him.

He said, "I got no interest in your sodbusters."

Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes were cold and dead with hurt.

"Goodbye, Ed," she said, without any emotion at all.

He said, "Goodbye, Honey," and turned toward Ace Caraway's saloon.

He felt suddenly heavy and black inside him.

ACE CARAWAY'S saloon was a big barn-like room, low-ceilinged, with hanging kerosene lamps. The right wall was parallelled by a long bar, with the usual mirror behind it. The rest of the main room was taken up by a few tables for drinking and the gambling layout—roulette, faro, and a green baize-covered poker table.

Behind the open door to the rear part of the building, Ed Dunn saw another door which opened off to the left, with a table desk and part of a heavy safe showing. A man sat at the desk, only the shoulder of a black broadcloth coat showing.

He had that glimpse and then he moved to the bar.

The bar and the room at large were crowded with Caraway's gunnies. As Dunn moved in, a dead silence fell over the place. He knew at once that the atmosphere was bad, worse than he had expected. These men had witnessed something more brutal than even they were ready to take. They felt excited, cruel, guilty and, basically, afraid. They were ready to do murder to

prove to themselves that what they knew was true wasn't true.

Dunn could read their mood in the grim jaws, the hot, secretly belligerent eyes, the controlled, sullen truculence with which they made even the movement of lifting a liquor glass from the bar.

A bartender with a cowlick over his forehead and protruding eyes like those of a boiled lobster moved up to him.

The bartender gave no greeting, asked nothing. He merely waited.

Dunn looked at him with eyes gone cold. "Friend," he said gently, "if you can get yore legs under you long enough, you can git me a glass of red-eye—an' leave the bottle."

The bartender's boiled eyes boggled at him an instant and then he moved with what Dunn judged was unusual speed.

The silence of the room was broken, not by voices, but by a sigh of movement. Dunn could feel and partly see in the bar mirror that the eyes on him had become at once more intent and more wary. The unease his cold voice had occasioned showed itself in a restless stir of feet and the shifting of bodies as men cleared their gun-sides.

Dunn poured from the bottle the bartender set before him and tossed the liquor down. It burned the back of his throat like acid and made a fire along his gullet. He waited for the talk to take up again, but there was no talk. He reached for the bottle and poured again. Steps, hard-heeled, came toward him. In the mirror, through lowered lashes, he saw the rock-faced man stalking toward him.

He held the drink in his hand, studying it innocently.

A voice rasped in his ear, "What's your business here?"

Dunn turned leisurely to face him, found himself looking into hot and brutal eyes which were as familiar to him as those of a catamount on the kill.

"Whatever it is," he drawled, "it's mine."

The rock-faced man looked at him. Hardcase, huh?" he snarled, with heavy sarcasm.

"I aim to be hard enough to get by." Dunn's voice burred. "I don't look for any trouble. But, hombre, I never step aside from it any. You got anythin' special on your mind?"

The hard, heavy eyes never wavered.

"You're in the wrong spot to talk that way," he said heavily, "I'm askin' you again—"

Dunn smiled inwardly. He knew that at another time this man would have gone into action instantly. Just now he was handicapped by the fact that his gunhands were so bruised and swollen as to be almost useless. Dunn had thought that as he watched that beating in the street, knowing the man to be a killer and knowing with a kind of inner wonder that he was incapacitating himself.

There were quick steps and another voice cut in.

"You were asked, stranger, what your business was here? Is it something you can't own up to?"

The man who spoke reminded Ed Dunn of Soapy. He had the same broadcloth coat, the fit of it definitely marred by the bulge of a sixgun under the left shoulder, the same expensive pants over the same kind of bench-made boots. But the resemblance ended there. This man had a big, flat, spatulate nose and thin, avid lips. His cheekbones were high and abnormally large and his flat black eyes looked out from lifted corners, as dead of expression as the bartender's, but dangerous in a way the lobster-eyed bartender could never have quite imagined.

"I'll tell you like I told your friend. My business is my own," Dunn said.

"I'm Ace Caraway," the black-eyed man said. "This is my town. Any man who comes into it answers to me or gets out pronto. Make your own choice."

Dunn's nerves buzzed. This was going better than he had thought and was more dangerous than he had guessed.

"I go where I please an' do what I please," he said, grinning bleakly.

The corners of Caraway's flat eyes tautened almost imperceptibly.

"I'll ask you this," he said softly. "Did you come here to help out the squatters on my land?"

His eyes came alive, bored into Dunn's.

Ed Dunn laughed. "I think I'll answer that," he said, amused. "I come here without no more interest in your sodbusters than you got in the gopher town outside of Tombstone or any other town. But I'll say this to you: I don't like you or your trained coyotes even as much as I do them."

FOR ONE long moment he thought he had gone too far. Ace Caraway's eyes flared death. The crowd of gunmen was deathly still. Ed Dunn wondered, with his face impassive and his nerves drawn into knots whether he would even be able to burn Caraway down before the storm of lead cut himself from his feet.

The gambler stood for a long second with the knuckles of his right hand white on the lapel of his coat. Then he relaxed, with a visible effort.

Dunn let his breath out softly, easily, apparently unimpressed.

"Mebbe you an' me had better talk a little," Caraway said. He nodded toward his office and led the way, not looking back.

The arrogance of the gesture raised Ed Dunn's hackles, but this was what he had planned, so he followed, his pace lounging and easy.

Despite the instinctive anger, there was a kind of jubilance in him because he had guessed right. He knew that Caraway would not have welcomed a gun showdown with a man he didn't know and who might best him, but he doubted, too, that Caraway, if the sign had been right, would have avoided it. The man was a greedy, murdering wolverine, but he was not a coward. What Dunn had counted on was the probability that Caraway would, at bottom, be puzzled and, being a professional gambler and therefore by definition a careful man, would want to know what the full score was before he made his final bet.

In his office, Caraway seated himself carelessly at his desk and indicated a chair for Dunn.

Dunn's quick glance encompassed the small room, with special emphasis on the bulky safe which stood against one wall.

"You an' me might get together," Caraway said, and his voice was suave now. "I can always use a good man."

Dunn stared at him. "Could be," he said pleasantly. "What you got on your mind?"

Caraway considered. "Right now," he said, "I'm bothered, like you know, with squatters on my range. Mebbe you might make a hand. Wages are good—a hundred and fifty a month and found." The gambler made his proposition with eyes slightly narrowed.

Dunn shook his head. "I work," he said evenly, "by the job, when I work at all. You got a job to do?"

Their eyes clashed, steel on steel.

"I could use a man who knew how to get rid of nesters," Caraway said.

Dunn laughed scornfully. "You sure could," he said. "What would it pay?"

Caraway eyes flamed. "You don't seem to think much of my methods."

Dunn grunted. "They smell."

For a second then, looking at the fury in the man's face he thought again he had overplayed his hand.

But the gambler took it. "Mebbe you can do better."

Dunn nodded. "Maybe I can."

"You want to take the job?"

"You want me to start now?"

"Why not? I sold a few cattle today. Looks like a likely time."

Dunn laughed. "A few?"

Caraway stared at him. "I sold a thousand head of cattle today," he said. "There's thirty thousand dollars in that safe."

Dunn's spine went cold. This was it. But why was Caraway willing to tell him that? A trick? A trap for him to fall into? Or merely the boast of a man sure of himself?

He got up lazily. "We've talked more'n I got the habit of doin'," he said, putting his full insolence into his voice. "You got a proposition to make?"

The gambler looked at him. "Five hundred dollars if you can get the sodbusters on the run in three days."

Dunn appeared to consider. Then, "I'll think it over," he said. "I'll either run them out—or you." And walked out.

His spine crawled as he turned his back. It was chilled through before he got out the door of the saloon.

Along the boardwalk his long, lean legs took up a leisurely yard-eating pace. He turned in at the hotel and went up at once. Soapy was in.

He shut the door and stood with his shoulder blades against it.

Bellew looked at him and said, "What you been up to?"

"Maybe too much," Ed Dunn drawled. "I went up to Caraway's to prod him into action. Could be I went too far. Right now he don't know if I'm a government man, a range detective, a gunnie hired out to the sod busters, an' outlaw lookin' for a safe to

blow, a hardcase willin' to tie up with him, or just a dim-wit on my way through, with more brass than brains. Anyways, he's decided that the safe thing for him is to have me ventilated because I've got more innards than he likes around him."

Bellew looked both outraged and despairing. "Some day I'm goin' to have your head examined," he said. "On the way to Boothill, likely."

"What you got to do now," Dunn told him grimly, "is to find out whether or not Caraway sold a thousand head of stock today, and whether or not he put the money in the bank or in his safe."

Bellew grinned faintly. "Where you think I been, pardner? Ace sold his cow-critters this mornin' an' he ain't been near the bank. Jed Hostetter, the banker, an' him don't agree. He's aimin' to take Jed over, too, some day."

Dunn's wide, mobile mouth relaxed. "You make your luck," he murmured. "But this is sure makin' a lot of it."

Soapy Bellew jerked as though somebody had stuck him with a needle. "You don't mean to say," he howled indignantly, "that you're thinkin'—"

Dunn's gesture cut him off. "Exactly."

Bellew stared at him appalled. "But, hombre, don't you know that jasper's loaded with gunnies like a yeller dawg with fleas? You're raw-hidin' me!"

The last sentence carried no conviction, even to him.

Ed Dunn merely looked at him.

"But, Ed," Soapy pleaded desperately. "The safe in that bank will give us eight, ten, twelve thousand. That's enough ain't it? An' that'll be easy. Why get greedy an' cut your throat on a chance too long for anybody to take?"

Dunn's flat, hard features were suddenly heavy and implacable. "You saw that beatin', didn't you, Soapy?"

Bellew looked a little sick. "I hear the jasper died," he said impulsively and unwisely.

Dunn's face went granite. "Wait here," he said briefly. "I'll be needing you."

IT DID not take him long to find the girl. She was at the storekeeper's house at the edge of town. Both women—the storekeeper's wife and the girl—had anxiety in their faces as he came in. "Ma'am," he said, "Could I talk a minute alone with you?"

The plump elderly woman eyed him with some misgivings but left them alone.

Dunn wasted no time. "Is there somebody in this sodbuster outfit that's got some innards?" he demanded curtly.

The girl nodded. "You know dad has," she said. "So have Dave Foster and Chuck McHugh."

"Will the others follow them?"

The girl's eyes glowed. "If there's a chance, they will. Some of them are scared because of that horrible thing this afternoon, but everybody's mad, too. They don't see how they can buck it."

Ed said slowly: "Your dad knows me. Tell him I say there's a chance. Tell him I say they're to be across from Caraway's deadfall at nine tonight. Anybody that can scare up one has got to have a shotgun. Others can have rifles or sixguns or pitchforks. Don't let 'em be noticed comin' in. At nine, there'll be an explosion down the street. They ain't to pay any attention to it. But anybody that runs out of Ace's saloon, they're to corral. There may be shootin' inside the saloon. When they hear it, they're to come in an' take over anybody they find there. I got a plan I think will put them gunnies into our hands. But I got to be trusted. Tell your dad that, and to be there."

He turned abruptly and strode toward the door.

Her voice followed him. "Ed—Ed! You're doin' this—why?"

He turned at the door. "Because it might profit me," he said harshly. "There ain't no other basis on which a deal is any good."

He could hear her sharp, hurt breath as he went out the door.

At the hotel, he said to Soapy, "That watch you cheated off of the feed an' grain man down to Tupelo workin'?"

"Never loses a tick," Soapy answered, with suspicious pride. "Why?"

"Set it right with this thing of mine," Dunn said crisply. "At nine sharp tonight, you blow the bank. You set it with that half-minute fuse of yours. Don't bother to soap it right and soup it right. We ain't takin' the bank. Minute you've set it, you come with both our hosses up to the back of Caraway's. There's a high back winder there. If you're settin' a cayuse you can

see through it. Use your own judgment then. There'll be homesteaders out front—I hope. Don't pay them any mind. Got it?"

Bellew drew a sharp rebellious breath. "Damn you, Ed," he said softly. "You've pulled some wild ones in your time an' I've played along. But I swear that if this goes wrong I ride out an' leave you. An' more than that—" his voice rose—"this is the last time—"

Ed Dunn yawned. "You know," he said thickly. "I ain't hardly seen that bunk of mine since I got here. I think I'll just lay on it until cookie hollers come an' git it."

Five minutes later he was asleep, with a chair under his doorknob and a thin thread attached to a canteen and a knife across his window. At ten minutes to nine he was in Ace Caraway's saloon.

The place was crowded now. A cattle outfit had drifted in from the range—maybe more than one outfit. Dunn guessed that some of the men would be hands from Caraway's own ranch.

He moved to the bar and got a drink from the lobster-eyed bartender.

He saw, with a little chill, that all or almost all of Caraway's gunhands were still there. Vaguely, he had hoped that some of them would have business elsewhere.

When he had tossed his liquor down, he wandered casually over to the poker table. There was a place open. It would leave him with his back to the door and to the main room.

"Room for another?" he asked politely.

The house man turned a frozen look on him and toward the empty chair.

There was a space, a little larger than usual between the house man's left and the next player who had, to Dunn, the air of a townsman.

He flipped his chair in his hand and said to the townsman grinning, "Friend, it's a peculiarity of mine. I never think I can win unless I'm on the left on the dealer. I see your luck ain't been good. Maybe this will change it."

He put his chair in next to the townsman, who moved over with a half resentful air. This brought Dunn's back toward the high window at the rear. It also brought him facing the main room.

He sat easily as though wholly unware of the stiffening in the room and the eyes turned toward him.

The skin over his backbone began to tighten slowly.

He saw Ace Caraway appear in the door of his office, look the room over casually, not noticing Dunn, and then nod. The rock-faced man answered, stalking casually toward the door.

DUNN fought to keep his breath from shortening. He was as sure as he had ever been sure of anything that Caraway would have him tolled into a gunfight from which he would not escape. The question was whether Caraway would have it set in time or not.

He bet his first two hands and waited, feeling the sweat on his back, so that he was afraid it would show.

His watch said one quuarter-minute to nine. Then at nine sharp the explosion went off. It was a muffled yet heavy thud that sounded in the saloon and shook the windows. It was evident that Soapy had done a good job.

Somebody gave a startled exclamation.

"What was that?" another asked.

The room was a babble. "Somethin' exploded. . . . Blew up somewhere. . . . Say, that's the direction of the bank. . . . Some jaspers must be robbin' the bank!"

The exodus started then. Ed Dunn sat frozen. Everybody stampeded out of the saloon but Ace Caraway's men. Everybody who might protect him. Everybody who might confuse the issue.

He saw Caraway in the doorway of his office and his eyes were narrowed, commanding. Then they turned toward his dealer and his head nodded slightly.

The dealer looked at Dunn and snarled. "Get that card out of your sleeve, you cheap highbinder."

It was crude. It was too crude. But there were no witnesses who counted.

Ed Dunn didn't wait. He had not only overplayed it; he had made a fatal mistake. He had forgotten that Ace Caraway didn't care in the least what happened to the bank. He had expected Caraway's men to go running with the crowd on the street and to run into unexpected shotguns. Then he, Dunn, would have gone into action. Now the whole thing was lost. He had walked, open-eyed, arrogant and stupid into a trap—his last trap. The dealer was not waiting, he was already drawing.

Dunn swept poker chips into the dealer's face, fell backwards as guns blasted and snarled past him. The townsman on his left, who had not joined the general exodus, took a .45 slug exactly between the eyes and died bleeding on the table.

Dunn's sixgun caught the dealer in the chest as the man turned to throw his second shot.

The rock-faced man was triggering from the corner of the bar. Dunn's second shot caught him in the middle. He gave a groaning grunt, audible over the powder blast of belching guns, and doubled over.

Behind Dunn the high window crashed in a jingle of blasted glass. He was only vaguely aware of it.

He came to his feet crouching, saw that he was too late to stop the shot of a gun trained on him, saw the man jerk, grunt and drop.

He whirled and felt a shot snarl by his head as he did so. Ace Caraway was in the doorway of his office, his smoking gun still leveled at Dunn.

Dunn slammed a shot at him, saw him stagger, changed position, like a cat twisting and felt an impact like a heavy blow along his ribs. The blow caught him in his whirling movement and spun him so that he landed next to his saddlebags. Lead slammed around him and his blood curdled. If a shot landed in those bags. . .!

He shot desperately at Ace Caraway again and felt the sickening click of an empty shell against the firing pin.

Caraway, leveling again, eyes insane with fury, checked with a sudden shock and agony on his face, put his hands to a hole as big as his fist in his stomach, tottered backward and then forward. Dunn, wondering vaguely why he himself was not dead now, saw the man die on his feet and heard, without entirely comprehending, the blast of a shotgun from the front of the saloon.

A bullet whipped into his left arm then. He fought the shock, feeling pain now rack him from the wound in his side. Painfully, viciously, he flung his sixgun at the gunnie who had shot at him. The gun went low, slapped the man heavily in the shoulder. Then the bellow of the shotgun came again and the side of the man's head was a bloody mess, and there was a sudden bewildering silence.

Dunn staggered to his feet. In the doorway were three men, one of whom was the girl's father, John Stone. In various positions about the saloon were men with hands over their heads. Dunn grinned at Stone. "Looks to me like you got the best of this, even if they didn't come runnin' out," he said shakily.

Stone was hard-eyed. "What happened at the bank? We got what little money we got in there."

"Yeah, so I figured," Dunn told him wearily.

He retrieved his gun and began to reload it. "That was a fake," he said. "I was hopin' to draw these jaspers off. It didn't work. Why don't you take what's left of these tail-down coyotes up there, so you don't lose them, and find out if I ain't tellin' you the truth."

"You've helped us out," Stone said grimly, "but I don't trust you any. If you an' your pal have robbed that bank—" His mouth set grimly. "My daughter likes you but I don't, any. You'll come with us."

DUNN finished loading his gun. It felt curiously light and inadequate in his hand in the face of those three scatterguns.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Soapy Bellew come in. Soapy was gray-faced and behind him was a homesteader with a pitchfork. The homesteader's expression was between panic and savagery.

"What're you doin' with that man?" Dunn snapped.

The homesteader turned startled eyes on him, and Soapy, as though he had eyes in the back of his head, dove behind the end of the bar. There was a brief scuffle there as the homesteader lunged vainly and then stood undecided.

Back of the bar, the lobster-eyed bartender struggled to his feet and then sank as a bottle smacked his skull. The homesteader lunged again, going behind the bar. The bottle caught him just above the left eyebrow, and Soapy Bellew came up into sight like a jack in the box. He had the bartender's sawed-off shotgun in his hands and his face was gray and strained and wildly nervous.

"Turn to me, gents," he quavered to the three at the door. "You got scatterguns. So have I. Let's see who's best at it."

The three at the door stared at him, bug-eyed.

Ed Dunn had a pale grin inside himself and then said harshly, "That's the play, gents. It's two against three, and I think we're all goin' to die for foolishness, unless you drag out of here."

Soapy Bellew's lips drew back over his teeth in a movement that was like a panic-stricken and cornered beaver. "An' git quick," he shrieked, "or it starts now."

There was something in the urgency of his tone which sent the others backing out.

When the swinging doors had clacked behind them, Soapy hissed at Ed Dunn: "Throw your saddlebags out the window—quick!"

Ed Dunn didn't hesitate. He and Soapy had been partners too long for that. But he threw them with a prayer. Dynamite was tricky stuff. You might hit it with a hammer and have nothing happen, or you might rub it gently and have it go off.

The saddlebags sailed through the high window at the back and in the same instant a heavy explosion shook the building. The door from Caraway's inner room slapped open and fell off its hinges. Part of the wall caved in, Dunn was flung from his feet. Instantly, a second explosion from outside shook the building.

"Soapy," Dunn raged, "You've ruined my saddlebags."

But Soapy Bellew was racing toward the wrecked inner room. Dunn followed him.

"You wanted this chance didn't you?" Soapy said shakily. "Well, now we got it."

Dunn looked at him wonderingly. "Where the hell did you get the dynamite?" he asked wonderingly. I thought I took half of it."

"I didn't need a third of mine," Soap snapped, still grabbing currency. "Wrapped her up tight and put the banker's desk on her."

Ed Dunn lifted his shoulders a little wearily. "Soapy," he said resignedly, "Soapy—" He broke off because there was a growing murmur of voices from the front of the saloon.

Soapy hefted his sack. "Come on," he snarled. "Our hosses is still out there, if they didn't git blowed up by your saddlebags. Let's git."

Outside the sound of voices and the murmur of a growing crowd had grown more ominous.

Ed Dunn stood with his gaze brooding and downcast.

"Soapy," he said, after a long moment. "This Caraway took plenty off these poor sodbusters. He rustled their few cows and he harried 'em. He cost 'em money all sorts of ways."

"You want to git strung up, or you want to git out of here," Soapy snarled.

Dunn's gray eyes were sober and bleak. "What do you say we leave half of this dinero for them gents that have lost out?"

"You crazy, you bat-eared—?" Soapy broke off, his eyes full of bitter understanding. "Why don't we look up the little gal and give it to her ourselves," he went on, with furious sarcasm.

Ed Dunn considered soberly. The pain in his side was now vying with the pain in his arm and winning by a narrow margin. His mind felt curiously light and detached from the things of this world.

"No," he said carefully. "No. I told her once that a man like me had no right to—"

The sudden surge of booted feet across the saloon floor cut him off.

"Git to the door an' hold 'em off with your scattergun while I divide up this dinero," he snapped.

While Soapy's half hysterical, half deadly voice snarled at the advancing townsmen and nesters, Dunn's swift fingers cut the money in half and seized on the stub of a pencil which lay on the floor by Ace Caraway's demolished desk.

"Ace took plenty away from you and we are giving some of it back," he wrote. "Divide it up and then come after us if you aren't satisfied."

He went to the door then, knowing that his wounds had made him light-headed and childish, and wishing that he had thought of something better to say.

He stuck his sixgun out beside Soapy's shotgun and said, "We got somethin' to do in here, gents. Anybody that busts through the door will get blasted."

He closed the door then behind them and they went out to their horses.

They were a long way away and there was no sign of pursuit when Soapy said, "When you're once a fool, it's for a long time."

Ed Dunn only grunted.

THE LONG RIDE HOME

A small fortune and a resting place for his last years would be his, if only Old Pete Henny could put his V-brand on a wild black stallion and send him to buck out his glorious fighting spirit for the entertainment of a thousand thrill-hungry city folk.

By JOHN BODRERO

OLD PETE HENNY was on his way home. Home was a town in Idaho he hadn't seen in seventy years, and Old Pete was still in New Mexico, six hundred miles away. But he had a few dollars in his money belt, a fast horse between his knees and a long-eared packmule bobbing along at the end of his lead rope. And there was contentment in Old Pete's heart.

Although he had left Idaho when he was fifteen years old, he still rode like a Northern hand, straight up and down from the stirrups, slapping his old-fashioned shotgun chaps with idle taps of his quirt every other jog. A little banty man with quick eyes, his ropy white mustaches seemed too big for his seamed old face. The red stallion that he rode brightened as it neared the ranch house that had been visible for the last hour like a cool oasis in the desert of dusty chamise brush. Old Pete straightened his hat and brushed his whiskers with two swift strokes of his right

He's wild as a cougar, Old Pete was thinking, watching the stallion's head go down as he bucked.

thumb, the way a prairie dog, sitting beside its burrow, washes its face. A ranch meant a square meal, and Old Pete was sick of the salty taste of the fried sowbelly and beans he'd been cooking at cattle-chip fires for the last week. But when he pulled up in the shade of the white oak in front of the ranch house, he waited in the saddle until he was asked to light.

The fat man sitting in the rocker on the porch fanned himself with his hat as he looked Old Pete over curiously.

"My name's Jim Hartwell," the fat man announced in a tired voice. "If you're looking for a job, you're hired, even if you do look too old to do a day's work. If you're just ridin' through, pile down anyhow and eat. There's some kindling out in back needs chopping. Those cowhands of mine won't do nothin' they can't do off the back of a horse. . . ."

Old Pete put up his animals, said howdy to a couple of men gentling a horse in the log corral, washed at the pump, and drifted over to the cookhouse. There were seven men and a red-headed fifteen-year-old kid around the table, including Hartwell, his great bulk jammed into an armchair, moodily spooning up his coffee. There was a piece of boiled meat and some hot corn bread on the table. Old Pete was too busy to listen to the talk until the red-headed kid repeated his question.

"I said, you want to sell that red stallion you're riding?"

"Not him." Old Pete's face wrinkled into an amiable smile. "He's the best quarter-horse stud in New Mexico. Up in Idaho, that horse'll make me a living for the rest of my days."

A dark-haired man whose clothes didn't look as though he worked in them, had been regarding Old Pete curiously from across the table. "Didn't you used to be a mustanger?" he asked.

Old Pete nodded. "Long time ago. But the money ran out of wild horses. They ain't worth chasing down any more. Them that's left is good for nothing but grinding up into chicken feed."

The dark-haired man nodded. "I remember you. I run a spread east of here. I'm over here to buy a bull off Hartwell. You came up to my place about ten years ago and picked up twenty-thirty head of wild horses out of the hills."

Mighta been, Old Pete was thinking. But Lawd-a-mighty, a man his age couldn't be expected to remember every ranch he'd ridden over. He squinted a moment at the dark-haired man. He did look familiar. A smile of comprehension dawned on his face.

"Sure, I remember now. You must be Bill Emory's boy from the old Spear Ranch. How's old Bill?"

"He's been dead now for three-four years."

Old Pete shook his head. "They're all going. All the real old-timers. Reckon I'm about the last one left."

AT THE end of the table, a wiry man with cheekbones high as an Indian's scraped back his chair, crossed his legs and started rolling a smoke. Old Pete remembered meeting him down at the stables when he'd put up his animals. Jeff Dody, his name was, the ranch bronc-snapper.

"There's still a wild horse or two worth catching," Jeff Dody said. "There's a horse ranges around here in the autumn that looks like a thoroughbred—but he ain't—that I'd give a hundred dollars to throw a leg over."

Emory, the dark-haired owner of the Spear Ranch, nodded agreement. "Yep, you're right, Jeff. He's the finest stallion I've ever seen. Not as big a horse as I like to ride, but he'd go ten hundred-eleven hundred pounds."

Jeff Dody looked speculatively down the table at Old Pete. "If you came in from the south, might be you saw him. Black as the ace of spades, with a white blaze on his forehead and three white stockings."

Old Pete wagged his head. "I sure did see a black stallion down in the basin country. Hazing a band of mares across the flats. But he was too far away for me to get a good look at him."

Jeff Dody leaned forward on the table and his voice was tense. "That musta been him. Was there about ten mares in the band, one an old flea-bitten gray, and another a real small blue roan?"

Old Pete nodded. "That's right."

Jeff slapped the table. "They're back!" he said triumphantly. "That stud is back in the Basin. Next time—"

"There ain't going to be any next time!" At the other end of the table, Hartwell laid his fork down carefully and wiped his

mouth carefully with the back of his fat hand. "This here's a cattle spread, not a crazy wild horse outfit. Just a couple months ago, three of you men sneaked a week off your work to chase that stud all over New Mexico. And what happened?" He glared at Jeff Dody. "The best cutting horse I ever bred lying out there with a leg busted in a dog hole. A three-hundred-dollar roping mare foundered and died. Two more horses stove up and still limping around the pasture. And not one of you even laid a rope on that black stallion."

Old Pete looked down at his empty plate. Jeff Dody knew horses, he reflected. Jeff wouldn't kill good horses to chase crowbait. The stallion must be fast, with a world of wind and heart, if Jeff and his three man relay couldn't run it down. Old Pete could see that Jeff Dody was looking sour, not mad enough to tell Hartwell to head in, but stubborn enough to want to finish something he'd started.

"You can tell me what to do in working hours," Jeff said quietly. "But on my own time—I'm my own boss."

Hartwell's face was swelling with anger. "The fall round-up's getting under way next week, and I need every man. I'm going to stop this foolishness if I got to put a rifle bullet in that stallion myself."

Emory from the Spear Ranch looked disturbed. "Take it easy, Hartwell," he said mildly. "That's too fine a horse to make buzzard meat out of. If I ever got a rope on him, I'd slap the Spear brand on his shoulder and let him run free. It does a man good to see a stallion like that running wild."

Like father, like son, Old Pete reflected. Old Bill Emory, dead now, had kicked around the range country all his life. Two-bit rustler when he was a wild kid, peace officer when he got his senses, and a rancher with savvy when he finally married and settled down. Old Bill Emory would have talked like that, sentimental old cuss about the wild stuff that ran on his range.

But even if young Emory was trying to smooth things over, Old Pete could see that Hartwell's temper was too far gone to permit him to back down.

"That black stud has cost me a thousand dollars in lost wages and burned up riding stock already," the fat man said emphatically. He pointed his finger at the red-headed kid. "Lee, tomorrow you take the Winchester and go out and find that horse. I don't care if it takes you a week. Don't you come back till he's stretched out dead."

In the morning, Old Pete ground an edge on the axe and started to split kindling. He worked automatically, tossing the billets in a pile by the kitchen stoop. According to what he'd heard last night, the black stallion must be plenty of horse. He recalled the conversation that had gone on in the bunkhouse after dinner. Old Hartwell, it seemed, had caught the stallion once himself, before it grew wise to covered pits and running snares, brush wings leading into trap corrals and relay chases.

"That's the reason Hartwell gets on the prod about that stud," Jeff had explained. "He never got his brand on him. He brought him in fighting at the end of a riata, the stallion blowing and striking with his eyes crazy full of fear. Hartwell was a top rider in those days, and we lipped down the horse and saddled him. You shoulda heard that stud whine like a bear when Hartwell climbed up." Jeff's eyes had lighted with excitement. "Three jumps around the corral, and the stallion smashed down the gate, brushed Hartwell off against the balance beam, and lit out for the high country. We found the saddle three weeks later where he'd rolled it off."

"Sure, I remember," the kid had said. "Hartwell never forked a mean horse again."

Old Pete leaned on the axe, a frown creasing his face. A horse like that, wild and a rough bucker to boot, would bring a fancy price up north. Not for gentling, but as an outlaw bucker to perform at rodeos. Delivered up north at the end of a lead rope, Old Pete was thinking, that horse was worth a thousand dollars, at the very least.

A door banged, and old Pete looked up. The kid was walking down toward the stables with the Winchester cradled in his arm, a pair of cased binoculars swinging from a strap across his shoulders. Old Pete drove the axe blade into the chopping block and fell in step with the kid.

"Say there, kid, I'd sure like to get a look at that horse alive. How about riding along with you?"

The kid shrugged. "It's okay with me. I didn't ask for the job anyway."

THEY RODE twenty miles to Suvapai Basin that day, the kid staring gloomily at the button of his saddle horn as if he were priming himself for the work he had to do tomorrow. Now was the time, Old Pete decided, now while the kid was edgy at the thought of shooting the horse, to stir him up a little. To make the kid decide, as though he'd made the decision through his own thinking, that it wasn't right to destroy the horse.

Perched on the back of his red quarter-horse stallion, Old Pete cleared his throat impressively and remarked on the lack of game. "Used to be," he said solemnly, "there was blacktail bucks feeding on every hillside, and bears scratching around the willows in the creek bottoms. Yessir, in my day, this country was covered with game." He glanced sidelong at the kid slumped in his saddle. "But the hunters came. First the hide hunters, slaughtering buffler till the plains stank with their carcasses. Then the bone pickers, loading up their wagons and making bone piles around the rail sidings that a man sitting on a horse couldn't see over." He sighed reminiscently and the kid stirred.

"I'd have liked to see those buffalo herds," the kid said.

"Well you won't no more," the old man said emphatically. "When they were gone, the meat hunters came, shootin' deer for the tracklaying crews. Venison three times a day for five years, and the deer were finished. All but a handful. Then lions and bears and wolves. Ate cattle, so they say. They wiped 'em out, with dog and trap and poison."

The kid was looking at him intently now, and he hurried on. "Yessir, one by one, they all went. All but a few wild horses. And now, they're about gone. The last of the free old West." His voice dropped and he shook his head sadly. The kid was looking troubled as Old Pete pulled a plug from his pocket and cut off a chew. Let him stew, Old Pete was thinking. Let him figure it out for himself. A couple of hours quiet reflection riding along the trail, would certainly make the kid wish he didn't have to shoot that horse tomorrow.

Old Pete felt pleasantly cheerful. He hid his feelings, munching on the chew of tobacco, and wondered whether he could get the kid to help him catch the black stallion. For by now he felt certain that the kid wouldn't be able to shoot it.

They saw the wild stallion about sunrise next morning. They had come on foot to the edge of the bluff overlooking the Suvapai Basin, leaving their horses tied a few hundred yards back out of sight. Lying on his stomach, looking out over the great expanse of canyon and dry wash and salt flats stretched out below like a wrinkled hide, Old Pete had been strangely moved. He had thought of himself as being old, but the Basin had been here for an eternity. Among those buttes in the dim distance, he had chased horses in the years gone by. He remembered a rock with a fading inscription cut into its face in a foreign tongue, where Spaniards in armor had ridden by in search of the cities of gold. Mexican pack trains had toiled across its canyons. Buffalo had stirred the dust of the bottom lands into whirling storms. Well, he reflected, those days were gone. And the kind of men who made those days were gone too. All but a handful. Maybe, all but him. He rolled over and sat up.

"From an underground cave near here," he said, "the buffler came up out of the ground in millions every year. Or so the Injuns say."

But the kid wasn't listening. He was staring out through the glasses, his face tense, his body trembling. "That's him!" the kid said. "That's him coming along the canyon."

He handed the glasses to Old Pete and rubbed the strain out of his eyes. Old Pete rolled back and followed the kid's pointing finger. There in the glasses, as though it stood within rope's throw instead of three hundred yards away, was the black stallion. The sun glinted off its ebony coat as it swung its head to watch the mares file by and jog down the trail. Old Pete swallowed excitedly. The horse was everything they'd said it was. Deep barrelled, with the high withers of a thoroughbred, its little ears and slender muzzle were proof of its descent from the Andalusian horses of Cortez. A thousand dollars worth of horse, Old Pete was thinking, just waiting for me to slap my brand on him. He set down the glasses and turned to the kid. Startled, he saw the Winchester against the kid's shoulder, the barrel steady as a rock. For an instant, he wanted to knock the rifle from

the kid's hands. But he restrained himself. The kid must think it out for himself.

"Don't aim for the head," Old Pete said. Maybe the kid needed a little prodding. "Cripple him with a shoulder shot, then you can walk up on him and—"

"Shut up!" the kid said fiercely.

Old Pete relaxed, smiling as he watched the kid's teeth clench and the sweat trickle down the side of the kid's freckled nose. The knuckles of the kid's trigger finger whitened.

"What you waitin' for?" Old Pete asked drily. "Never shot a horse before?"

"No!" The kid's voice was sharp with anger as he lowered the rifle and looked away. "And I ain't never going to." The words rushed from him then. "I told Hartwell I didn't want to do it. Let him shoot the horse himself. I'm going over to the Spear Ranch and work for Emory."

He stood up abruptly, and the stallion snorted, dropped like a cat into the sliding shale below, scrambled through the rolling rock and broke out in a driving run across the flats.

Now was the time, Old Pete decided, while the kid was sore at Hartwell for sending him out on a job he didn't want, to get the kid to help catch the wild horse. He cleared his throat noisily. No use waiting for a shoe to cool before you laid it on the anvil.

"In a week or so, I reckon Hartwell will ride out here himself and make bear-grub out of that stallion," he ventured.

At first the kid appeared to take no notice, but Old Pete could see his lips whitening in anger. "Damned horse doesn't do him any harm. He oughta leave it alone," he muttered finally.

"Well, you know Hartwell," Old Pete said. "He'll get to worrying his fat carcass that his men are sneakin' off to chase that stallion, and one day it'll just get too much for him." He scratched his chin speculatively. "Unless we stop him," he added meaningly.

The kid jerked around. "What you getting at?"

"Well, suppose you and me took that stallion clean out of the country?"

The kid laughed. "You'd never be able to catch him. Jeff Dody—"

The old man snorted. "With you to help drive him, I'll catch the stud on foot."

The kid pondered for a moment. "Then what?"

"I'll take him up north, and let him buck at rodeos." The old man let his voice rise. "Can't you see him now, that black stallion pitching around an arena, with a rider trying to stick on his slippery back? Crowds a-yellin' and a-whoopin' from the stands. . ."

THE KID had jumped at the bait like a trout after a fly, Old Pete was thinking. He chuckled, watching the band of wild horses way below in the flats feeding toward the edge of a canyon. Two days he'd studied them through the glasses, and always, this time of the morning, they fed away from the water hole toward the brushy entrance of the canyon.

"See that peak up there," he said to the kid and pointed along the valley. "Well, you ride the ridges to the timber under that peak. Make a lunch and I'll meet you up there in time to eat it."

Old Pete saddled his red quarter-horse stallion and rode quietly down into the flats. Skirting the trees, and coming with the wind in his face, he jumped the band at fifty yards. The black stallion lit out through the chamise, the mares scattering like a covey of quail. But the old man's red stallion had been bred for a terrific quarter-mile burst of speed. Not enough to overtake the stallion, but enough to put Old Pete within throwing distance of the little blue roan mare. He shook out a loop, and dabbed it over the mare's neck, dallied three times around the horn, leaned back and let the slack smoke out.

With the loop choking around her neck, the mare cooled down quickly, dancing and snorting as he led her away. The band had disappeared, but Old Pete knew horses. For two hours he led the mare slowly along at the edge of the high brush, until she followed docilely in the tracks of Old Pete's red stallion, only once in a while tugging lightly as though she heard the black stallion somewhere in the trees on the slope above. Old Pete, watching and listening too, at last heard the crackling in the brush that meant that the black stallion, caution almost thrown aside, was following the tracks of the red stud and the blue roan mare.

He struck the spurs to his horse then,

and galloped along until he came to the canyon that he had picked out earlier, and started up the trail, the mare following at a long lope at the end of the riata.

The kid was waiting for him up in the scrub pine just below the divide. The old man muttered excitedly as he haltered and picketed the mare and tied the stallion to a pinon tree at the edge of the clearing.

"The stallion's coming up the canyon now," he explained as he recoiled his riata. "He's crazy for a fight with my red stud, but he's edgy, because he smells me too." He dumped a saddlebag and picked out an extra riata and a couple of pairs of burlap hobbles. "You hide back in the timber, and when you see the black stallion come into this clearing, you come out a-yelling and swinging your rope."

The kid nodded. "What about you?"

"I'll be hiding in the brush down where the canyon narrows. Soon as I hear you yelling, I'll move down alongside the trail. He's got to come by me. So put the fear into him, boy. I want that black devil to come foggin' back down that trail with you hazing him every jump."

Except for the wind drifting up the canyon and whispering in the pines over his head, it was suddenly very still. Old Pete squatted in the buckthorn, his hands shaking and sweat pouring off his face in little streams. He cursed pantingly, afraid the stallion had winded him and gone back down to the flats. He was thinking of moving closer to the trail, when he heard the mare whicker. Old Pete jumped and the skin crawled under the back of his hat, while he strained to see into the shadows at the edge of the brush.

Then the screaming challenge of his red stud cut into his ears. There was a brief flurry of flailing hoof beats, and he heard the kid's high yell. He scuttled through the brush to the edge of the trail, took two turns of the riata around a scrub pine, and waited tensely crouched. Up the trail he could hear the thunder of hoofs; a flying black body careened around the bend, and the stallion was on him.

He snaked the riata up from the ground and the stallion broke stride, weaving away. But the loop reached out for him and settled around his neck. The horse whirled by close enough for Old Pete to have laid a hand on him. The branches of the scrub pine whipped under the strain as Old Pete snubbed the slack. The riata sang tight, jerking the stallion's head down and to one side, and in the next instant he piled up in the brush. The old man threw a knot around the tree and ran out, trailing a light rope behind him.

The stallion scrambled to his feet and threw himself back, fighting until he squatted almost to the ground, snapping his head from side to side against the pull of the rope. Until he caught sight of the little man. His ears lay back and he raged forward like a charging wolf, neck stretched low, his jaws gaping as he sprang. But the rope on his neck jerked the stallion in an arc around the tree as the little man skipped nimbly away.

He's wild as a cougar, Old Pete was thinking, watching the stallion's head go down as he bucked. Old Pete stood clear, feeling the ground tremble as half a ton of maddened horseflesh churned up the brush, almost hidden in the whirlwind of billowing dust. Ever closer, but always beyond reach of those striking forefeet and bared teeth, the little man hopped and ran in and retreated.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of New Western Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1946. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of New Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October 1946. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

At last Old Pete saw his chance. He flipped the light rope as the stallion plunged, yanked the loop shut around both hind legs, and held the slack down across his thigh. The stallion jumped away, jerking the little man with him, tangled a forefoot in the rope around his neck and fell heavily on his side. The hillside was suddenly still, and to Old Pete's nostrils came the pungent smell of crushed mesquite.

THERE WAS something wrong. Sitting on the stallion's heaving ribs, fastening the burlap hobbles to his legs, Old Pete waited for a feeling of elation that didn't come. Looking at that sleek black hide with the little rivers of sweat trickling through the hair, Old Pete tried to think of the thousand dollars that horse would bring up north. But he just felt guilty and a little sick.

Evidently the kid felt the same way. He reached down and pulled a burr out of the stallion's matted mane. "When I saw him whirling down on your red stud with murder in his eye, the wildness of him choked me up like buck fever. He ain't like other horses. . . ."

Old Pete cursed wearily and started gathering sticks for a fire. Sentiment was all right in its place, but he was too old to be a fool where money was concerned. He stared glumly into the fire, waiting for the little running iron to heat in the coals. All he had to do to earn that money was to put his V brand on the black stallion's shoulder. He could see that brand now, how it would look when the stallion was crowded into a saddling chute at the rodeo grounds. In the smoke of the fire, he could see the black stallion, bucking his heart out as if fighting would take him back to the wild free days when he hazed his mares across the Suvapai Basin. Three years, maybe as long as five years, and one day the stallion would be a spavined hulk of wornout horsemeat, limping on his way to the dog-food slaughter house.

The kid's voice broke in on him coldly. "You going to let that iron melt before you put the brand on?"

Old Pete kicked the iron out of the fire and picked it up with a piece of burlap. He pressed it smoking into the ground, cooling it, and hesitated. He held it there a moment.

"What's the matter," the kid said quietly. "You never brand a horse before?"

Startled, Old Pete looked up. The kid's mouth was curved up into a friendly kind of grin.

"If we stay here until that iron rusts away," the kid went on, "you still won't be able to put your brand on him. There's only one thing you can do. Go ahead and do it. You can draw anybody's brand with a running iron."

"That's right." Old Pete nodded solemnly, and looked down as if he was suddenly aware of the running iron in his hand. "Anybody's brand." He squatted down, as confident now as he had been hesitant before, and traced with sure strokes on the horse's shoulder. The stink of burnt hair drifted into the trees and he was finished. He stepped back, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

"A little wavy maybe, but you can read it a hundred yards away." He looked down at the spear he had burned on the horse's shoulder. "He's a Spear Ranch horse now, and Emory would want him running free. With that brand on his shoulder, no one will touch him any more."

He slipped the hobbles from the stallion's fetlocks. The stallion scrambled up grunting, walked away a few yards and broke into a ragged lope. Then he began to run easier, as though strength flowed into his body every time his hoofs touched the ground. By the time he reached the flats, his tail was high and he was running bunched up like a horse that isn't used to carrying weight.

Old Pete watched him out of sight. "He wasn't just a wild horse," he said. "He was the West, the prairie before the plow broke ground, the plains without a wagon rut. The West I knew, kid. He wasn't born to work under a saddle any more than I could have lived tied down to a job in town."

His eyes were fixed on the Suvapai Basin stretched out below and his lips curved into a smile half-hidden under the drooping white mustache as though he were pleased with the memories that the dust devils whirling across the flats were bringing to life. His days, he was thinking, had been like a pleasant journey, and now it was time he was going home.

Through Hell to Monterey!

By ROY VANDERGOOT

IT WAS September 1846, and the Americans holding Los Angeles against the the resurgent Californios were hopelessly outnumbered. Fifty of them under the command of Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie against five hundred under Jesé Maria Flores.

As Lieutenant Gillespie paced his quarters, pondering the problem, a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in!" Gillespie shouted.

"A Mr. Brown to see you, sir," his orderly announced.

"Brown?" snapped the harassed lieutenant. "Never heard of him. All right, show him in."

The man who entered was long and lean. The mark of sun and wind lay stamped on his bronzed, sinewy features.

"Lieutenant," he began, "I have come to offer you my services to ride to Monterey for help."

Gillespie scarcely looked at him. If this fellow was willing to risk his hide—well, why not? "Fellow," he said, "you've got a job!"

After talking to Brown a while, Gillespie wrote on cigarette papers several identical words: "Believe the bearer," signed them and stamped them with his seal. Brown concealed each folded paper in his thick, bushy hair and was ready to start.

When dusk fell he casually walked his horse out of the besieged city. Intercepted by Mexican sentries, he told them he had a belly-full of Lieutenant Gillespie's overbearing ways and was deserting.

The sentries were suspicious. "You will come with us to be questioned by *el jefe,*" one of them told Brown.

Pretending agreement, Brown murmured, "*Bueno,*" then drove the spurs home and raced off.

Brown rode a fine saddler, but his pursuers, too, forked excellent horseflesh. Peeking over his shoulder, Brown noted the pursuit keeping up with him. Again shots blasted. Bullets whined close. It was only a matter of time till a chunk of lead found its target.

But the lanky gringo had chosen the terrain with cunning foresight. Now, coming upon a wide gully, he touched spurs and his horse sailed across it as if it had wings. This gully, when later measured, proved to be thirteen feet in width.

When the Californios came upon the yawning gulf, they drew rein. That leap was too hazardous for the size of their guts. Spitefully firing their rifles at the fast-fading sound of hoofs pounding north, they turned back.

But John Brown's luck had run out. His mount had collected lead, and collapsed.

Dawn found him walking. Veering into the chaparral, he wormed his way through brush and shrubbery, forging ahead all day. When darkness came, he stole up to a rancho and quietly stole himself a mount.

Fifty American lives and a fabulous empire hung in the balance when John Brown rode through a barricade of red-hot Mexican lead.

When he reached Monterey the third night, he had ridden more than four hundred miles in fifty-two hours.

But the end was not yet in sight. The general commanding Monterey had gone to San Francisco to confer with Commodore Stockton, and his subordinate had not the authority to order reinforcements to Los Angeles.

Brown was all for dashing on to the northern city, but the Monterey officer ordered him to bed. For three hours John Brown slept, then was off again.

At eight o'clock the next night he arrived in San Francisco, only to find that he had ridden too fast—the Monterey general, traveling by boat, hadn't yet reached the Golden Gate town.

Having ridden six hundred miles in eighty-odd hours, he slept soundly that night.

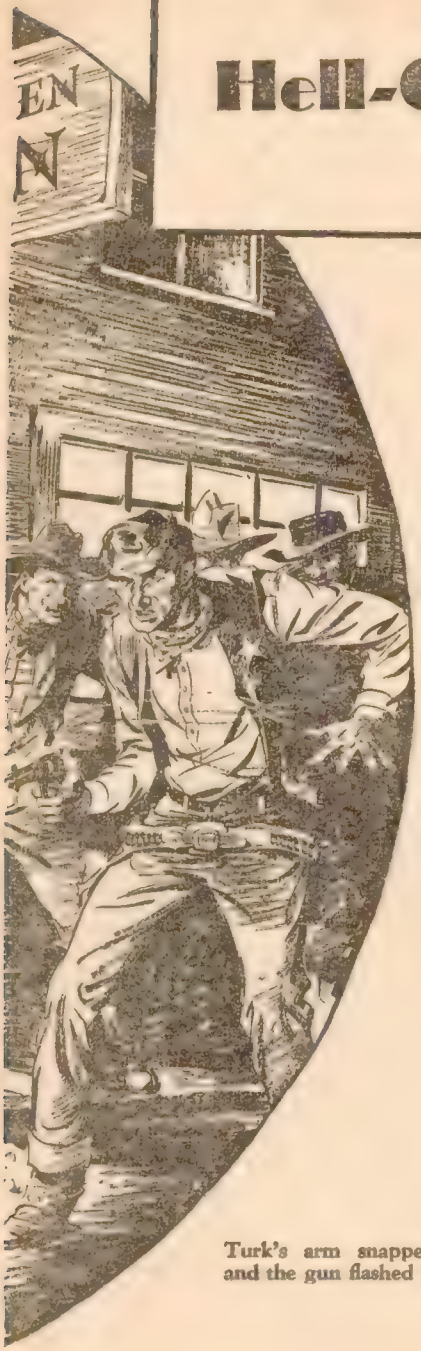
Action-Packed Novel of Gun-Law on the Untamed Range

By THOMAS THOMPSON

"I'll handle him my way," Rod said. "I'm not armed."

Marshal Rod Silvers' choice was easy: Live and fight for a Judas law-badge; or take the last, hopeless glory-ride to Boothill—damned forever as a traitor both by the killer king who had bought his tin-star loyalty, and by the nesters to whom he owed his worthless life!

Hell-On-The-Law!



Turk's arm snapped up and the gun flashed flame.

CHAPTER ONE

New Law for Bainville

THE WAGONS took shape slowly under the mushroom of dust as they turned toward the bridge road into Bainville. They were as varied as the men who drove them and they had the same weatherbeaten look about them. It had been six months since wet sacks had soaked their wheels, and the tires creaked against the roadbed and the spokes rattled in the hubs. The nesters gave no greeting as they pulled up before Marshal Rod Silvers, there on the bridge.

The marshal moved woodenly, his lean face set against the hostile eyes that openly accused him of his guilt, and once when a girl of nine stared at him too long he felt the color creep under his tanned skin. His own daughter was that age, and she too had come to stare at him that way. It was one of the things that had made him decide; that, and Lucille Brown who taught the school, and the nagging memory that once he had been an honest lawman.

For he had decided now, and with that decision came the certain knowledge that he must kill three men. He could run then, and the nesters would have their chance to hold out until the railroad came and made their waterless land more valuable than their first dreams of green things had promised. Lacey Prentice, Turk Travis, and Pete Martin—those three he would have to kill. Even that would not erase the fact that he had sold his badge to a killer, but it would be a chance at

life for Rod and Lucille Brown and Susan. A nester spat a stream of tobacco juice and narrowly missed Rod's shoulder. The marshal appeared not to notice, but the knot in his stomach twisted tighter.

He wanted to tell these plow-lean men of the gun-trap that awaited them in the dusty town across the bridge, but it would be a waste of time. In spite of the patience that made them seem almost without spirit these men had a way of saying what they thought. They knew Lacey Prentice was after their land, and they knew that Rod Silvers and his two deputies were nothing more than hired tools of Lacey Prentice. If Rod were to speak up now they would tell him they believed nothing he said and drive on across the bridge into gunfire. It was best he should work it out as he had planned.

HE CAME to the wagon where the nine-year-old girl had stared at him. He did not pull back the blankets or tarps that were thrown carelessly in the backs of the wagons and he felt the nervous suspicion of some men, the quick hope of others. It was the way Lacey Prentice wanted them to feel. There was more chance they would start trouble when they felt that way.

A grubby boy of ten grinned sheepishly when Rod took the small caliber rifle he carried, then he reached down under the seat and took out an ill-wrapped package. "This is for Susan's party tonight," he said.

"I want to thank you a lot for that, son," Rod Silvers said. "I know Susie—"

"She can't help the father she's got," the boy's mother cut in, and she slapped the lines against the backs of her sunken-side mules and crossed the bridge. Rod Silvers went on to the next wagon and the men laughed openly. One man handed down a rusty musket that hadn't seen service for twenty years and a roar of laughter went up from these men in whom laughter seemed a foreign thing. "No guns in Bainville," the nester said, and Rod thought of the twenty Lacey Prentice men who still wore their weapons openly. Those men were waiting now, up by the livery stable and in the second story of the hotel.

He checked the last one, and the wagons crossed the long curving bridge that was their only way into Bainville and headed down the single street of the town. The deep dust of the street ran liquidly from the wagon tires and pocked the wagon tracks like falling buckshot. The heat settled against the blue shirts of the drivers and the stagnant smell of the near-dry river came here to the bridge and clung pungently in Rod Silvers' nostrils. He calculated the minutes to the moment he must take his first step against the man who picked his deputies for him. He saw the wagons turn into the big lot by the Lacey Prentice General Store.

Rod moved slowly then, down the street toward the store, and for the first time since coming here he felt that he was actually the marshal of Bainville. He could take his time. These men acted slowly, and even now with the pressure of waterless months and the smoke of their scanty hay supply still fresh in their nostrils they would act slowly. They would follow the dictate of Craig Collins, their leader. It was Craig Collins that Rod would have to convince, for the oldster could handle even the hot-headed younger ones. He saw Collins climb out of his wagon and start for the store.

Rod's senses became alert now, but it all seemed as if it were something that was not happening to him. He thought back to that other night when he had crossed a man like Lacey Prentice and he remembered the riders that came to his home there at the edge of a town like Bainville. They had piled mattresses against the wall, Rod Silvers and his wife, and it had made a barricade for Susan. But it had not stopped the bullet that came through the window and the next day Rod Silvers buried his wife and rode west with a four-year-old daughter. He had decided then that the next time he would be on the winning side. He had not known that he would meet Lucille Brown in Bainville..

These thoughts ran through his mind as he quickened his pace. The nesters were on the porch of the store and they were grouped around the new sign that said No Credit. Here in the street he could feel the tension of them. He glanced quickly at the men lounging up near the livery stable and he saw the rifles in the

second story of the hotel. He saw his deputy, Pete Martin, leaning against the wall of the marshal's office, smoking a cigarette, and he remembered that tonight was his daughter's birthday party.

Lucille Brown and Susie had planned it for a week and Pete Martin, as he toyed nervously with his gun that had killed a dozen men, talked of little else. Outside of killing there was only one thing in Pete Martin's life, and that was Rod's little daughter, Susie. Rod Silvers swallowed against the dryness in his throat. Pete Martin would be the hardest of the three to kill.

The voices of the nesters rose nervously, and they glanced toward the empty beds of their wagons. Rod could hear the soothing voice of Craig Collins as he stood there on the porch of the store, an old man with a thin transparent face, looking at the sign as a man might appraise a piece of rocky soil. A young woman called from one of the wagons, "Three yards of that checkered calico, Clem. That's all I'll need. If I could have three yards." She had not seen the sign. Her husband did not answer her. Rod crossed the street toward the store.

Yes, Pete Martin would be the hard one to kill. You couldn't quite hate a man who loved Susie the way Pete did, Rod told himself. Not hate him enough to enjoy killing him, even though you knew he was the most dangerous of the three. It would be a pleasure to kill Lacey Prentice, for Prentice was a symbol of what was wrong—a menacing Buddha-like man who never left his room yet whose poison seeped into the air and tainted all those it touched. Turk Travis, Rod's other deputy, would be the easiest, for he was a hulking brainless giant who, because of his nature, would make the first move. Turk Travis would reach for his gun without thinking, and it would be easy that way. Rod Silvers came up on the store porch. The nesters looked at him, then Craig Collins jerked his head and three of the nesters entered the store.

It was a big store and complete, from the pile of new lanterns by the door to the slanted glass cases of macaroni and dried fruit under the counter and the drums of kerosene and cases of giant powder in the back room. It had the smell of plenty about it. There were six clerks where usually there were two, and Turk Travis was one of them. They all wore guns under their white aprons. Craig Collins said, "That sign there on the door. That must be fer newcomers."

Turk Travis said, "No credit for nobody," and grinned as he said it. He was thick across the shoulders and his forehead sloped back as if a horse had kicked him there. He took off his ill-tied apron and moved from behind the counter. He seemed more at ease now, with his gun showing. He was not wearing his deputy marshal's badge.

"It's new, you working in the store, Turk," Craig Collins said. "Maybe we ought to talk to Prentice."

"I'll talk for Prentice," Turk Travis said, "and where I work is my own business. Prentice says there'll be no more credit."

"When he sold us the land he said he'd carry us through to the rains."

"He didn't know you'd be a shiftless lot that wouldn't try to raise nothing."

ROD SILVERS saw the cords knot on Craig Collins' neck. He was an old man with a slow peaceful way about him, but there was a lot of pride in the set of his shoulders. He was having trouble holding himself in check now. He said, "We was told Lacey Prentice figgered on sinking a couple of wells. That would of pulled us through to the rains."

"That's the way with you nesters," Turk Travis said. "You always expect somebody to do something for you. You never get around to doin' nothing for yourself. Prentice is tired of playing Santa Claus to you. There won't be no more credit." The other clerks had taken off their aprons.

"The news that the railroad is comin' through the bottoms there wouldn't have nothin' to do with it, would it now?" Craig Collins said.

"You got cash, state your needs. Otherwise, get out," Turk Travis said.

Rod Silvers watched it all, a dry taste in his mouth. It was going as planned, just as everything Lacey Prentice did. Those few rifles he had missed there in his inspection were giving the nesters a false sense of security. He could see it

on their faces. They didn't look so tired now. Craig Collins had taken a step forward.

"Maybe we'll take the things we need, Turk," he said slowly. "We got women folks and kids that need things. Maybe we'll take 'em."

Turk Travis moved quickly. His huge fist came up and slashed down and it cracked against the back of Craig Collins' neck. The old nester fell heavily, his head striking the floor. Turk Travis said, "You saw it all, Marshal. He threatened me. He was gonna start trouble. You saw it."

"Yeah, I saw it," Rod Silvers said dully. He was to stand back now, take Turk's side just enough to goad the nesters into open rebellion. The fight would move into the street—twenty nesters against six of the Lacey Prentice men. An unfair fight, started by the nesters. They didn't know about the men up by the livery stable and they didn't know about the dozen rifles in the second story of the hotel. All Rod Silvers had to do was stand back.

A month ago he might have gone through with it. He would have told himself that what was crooked in a marshal was good business in a sheriff and smart politics in a Congressman. It was the only way for a man with a daughter to raise to play it safe. But now it had built up within him until it was like a man who has swallowed too much bad whiskey and finally there is a drink that will not go down. It was like that with Rod Silver.

The young nester whose wife had asked for the calico picked up an axe handle and started toward Turk Travis. Rod Silvers took one step forward and sunk his fist in the kid's belly. The nester staggered back, gasping for breath, and Rod pulled his gun.

"Get back, you young fool," he commanded, thumbing back the hammer of his gun. "Can't you recognize a trap when you see it? Get back to your wagons, all of you!" He saw the startled look in the eyes of Turk Travis.

"Shoot him down, Marshal," Turk yelled. "It's the only way to stop 'em now!"

"Shut up, Turk," Rod Silvers said. "I'll do the talking!" It gave him a thrill he had forgotten to make a stand like this.

"Get back to your wagons," Rod repeated. "Drive out of town slow and don't look back. You can't get no place acting like this."

Craig Collins was on his feet now. He stood there shaking his head. The young nester had recovered his breath and he stared at the gun pressed in his middle. His face was silvered with sweat. "Since when are you interested, Marshal?" the kid sneered. "I wouldn't trust a damn word you say. Get out of my way. There's a rifle you missed in my wagon!"

"You make a move for it and I'll kill you," Rod Silvers said flatly. He half-turned toward Craig Collins. "Go out there on the porch and look up toward the livery stable. Then take a good look at the upstairs windows in the hotel. Come on back and tell this young hot-head what you see."

Craig Collins stood a long time, looking deep into the face of Rod Silvers. Then he went to the door of the store and stood there on the porch, carelessly surveying the street. When he came back there was a gray pallor in the deep pits of his cheeks. "We'll do as the marshal says," he said softly.

They moved out slowly, and some of them let their eyes linger on the stock of merchandise that crammed the shelves of the store. Rod kept watching the kid he had stopped. There was a hurt look in the young nester's eyes like a dog that has been punished and does not understand. There was a bolt of checkered calico on the shelf near the door. Rod took it with his left hand and shoved it into the arms of the nester. "Your wife ordered this," he said flatly. Behind him Turk Travis was cursing steadily, but Rod paid no attention.

He stood on the porch, his gun in his hand, and watched them drive away. The woman in the third wagon held the bolt of calico in her arms like she would a baby. He husband slapped the lines against the backs of his mules and stared straight ahead. Up there by the livery stable the men no longer lounged listlessly. The rifles were gone from the second-story window.

Turk Travis came and stood beside him. From his pocket the big man had taken the deputy marshal's shield and pinned it

back on his shirt. He said, "I think there'll be a new marshal in Bainville soon now."

"You ain't paid to think, Turk," Rod said. He holstered his gun, stepped down from the porch and walked across the hot street into the shadows thrown by the setting sun. Pete Martin was still lounging against the wall of the marshal's office. His hard young face held a fixed grin. Rod tried to brush past him, but the kid gunman held his arm.

"That wasn't very smart, Rod," Pete Martin said. "You got a daughter to raise."

"I never knew you to worry about a man before," Rod Silvers said sarcastically.

"I'm thinking of Susie," Pete Martin said.

"Thanks for nothing, Pete," Rod Silvers said.

The young killer waved his hand. "Don't mention it," he said. "See you at the party."

Rod Silvers went up the street toward Lucille Brown's house where Susan boarded and roomed. There was a chill spot in the middle of his back. The sun went down and the quick darkness smothered the town. He saw Turk Travis hurrying across the street toward the Prairie Queen Saloon, and in a little while a light came on in the upstairs office of Lacey Prentice.

CHAPTER TWO

Rod Silvers' Reformation

THEY MADE an odd foursome there at the table, their faces lighted by the nine candles on the cake. There was a wistful look in Pete Martin's eyes as if perhaps he was remembering how things might have been. He sat facing the window. He had left his guns hanging on the hall tree near the door. His pale gray eyes never left the face of Susan Silvers who sat with squinted lids and wrinkled nose, making her wish, while she clung to the overly expensive doll he had brought her.

The marshal of Bainville watched his daughter too, and there was a troubled fear about him. She was all that was left, and he was acutely conscious of his duty to her. It was a material thing, far removed from wandering from place to place, looking for a job that paid less than a living wage. He wanted a home and security and he was willing to pay any price for it. The set of doll furniture he had given her was less expensive than Pete Martin's gift, but to him it represented something.

Lucille Brown had given her a book. It told of men who had built an empire in the East—of how they had fought for their rights against all odds and of how they had won. It was a thing that Lucille Brown believed, and it was in her violet eyes and in the tilt of her chin. Her face was strangely white as she looked from the child to the father, and then to the young deputy whose business was stamped on his thin features.

The child opened her eyes and they sparkled with the excitement of the occasion. She looked first at her father, admiration and love in her glance, and then at the woman who was as much a mother as she had known. Lately there had been a puzzled hope in her eyes and with the frankness that was so much a part of her she had asked why the three of them could not be together always. She looked at Pete Martin with a nine-year-old's unconcern for tied-down guns and a killers' reputation and said, "Thank you, Pete. It's the nicest doll I've ever seen." Then she blew out the candles. Pete Martin moved like a cat to strike a match and apply it to the wick of the white-globed lamp.

They ate their ice cream and cake, and they played the games that Susan had planned; then one by one they kissed her before Lucille put her to bed. It seemed that Pete Martin lingered longer than the rest, and he held her close when she put an arm around her neck. He said, "Can I carry her to her room?" He said it as if it were the first time he had ever asked a favor of any man. When Rod Silvers nodded his agreement he forgot for a second that this thin-waisted youth was a man he would have to kill.

Pete Martin did not stay long after that. All evening he had watched the hall clock with irritating regularity and now that the child was out of the room he moved with a nervousness that set up a tension within the other two. Rod Sil-

vers had seen him this way before, and he knew that Lacey Prentice had given him a job to do tonight. He thought of a cat, tail twitiching with taut expectancy, sitting in front of a gopher hole. Pete Martin made no excuse when he left and gave no thanks to anyone. He was himself again. As he buckled on his guns he said, "Turk is drinking, Rod. Stay out of his way." Then he was gone, and as the front door closed a chill that was not in the air came into the room.

With Susan in bed and Pete Martin gone, Rod felt nervously uncertain as he faced Lucille across the lamplight. He got up awkwardly and started to leave and she came and put her arm around his shoulder. "Sit down, Rod," she said softly. "I want you to tell me about today."

"I shouldn't be here alone with you like this," he said, embarrassed. "People will have a lot to say."

"They've already said what they could," she said frankly. "I want you to tell me."

He told her briefly, leaving out nothing. He told her how Lacey Prentice had laid the trap and how, when the time had come, he had not been able to go through with it. He did not try to make himself a hero; neither did he try to excuse the fact that he had made the agreement with Prentice in the first place. He had never felt that he need make excuses to this woman.

When he had finished, she met his eyes and said, "What now, Rod?"

He shook his head. "I don't know," he said simply. "I've seen men cross Lacey Prentice before."

She was first a woman in love and second an idealist. She came to him quickly now and put her arms around him. She pressed her cheek close to his and her words came in a soft rush against his ear. "We can leave now," she said. "Tonight. I'll get Susan's things together. When we can we'll be married and we'll start over, the three of us." He shook his head.

"We know each other too well," he said slowly. "In time you'd grow to hate me, knowing that I ran."

"No, you're wrong," she said, clinging to him. "I've said a lot of things, but it was because I was afraid you'd become like Turk Travis or Pete Martin in time. I know now you never could—that you're above that. We can leave now—"

"Turk Travis is out looking for me," Rod said. "I couldn't leave, knowing that he was looking for me. He'd always be there some place, always. I've seen men who ran from things like that, Lucille. They aren't pretty to watch."

"Just Travis, then," she said. "You will have done your part."

He smiled at her wistfully. "It has to be all the way," he said.

"But you'll have no help."

"Then I'll do it alone."

"You can't, Rod. Not alone."

"We'll see," he said slowly. Then, "If something went wrong it would be good to know you had Susan. You'd do that for me?"

"I could never part with her. You know that Rod."

She had tried to keep her voice level, but now her chin quivered and the tears welled into her eyes. He held her tight in his arms, feeling the warmth of her against him. The blood raced in his veins as he kissed her lips again and again; then he tore himself free and went away. In the shadows of the porch he paused to buckle his gunbelt a notch tighter before stepping into the night.

He walked down the tree-lined street slowly, nerves alert. The heat of the day had settled some and the sky was clear. The stars cut jagged holes in the deep blackness of the sky and a timid breeze stirred the topmost leaves of the elms. His feet made a crunching sound in the gravel. A man came angling across from the lighted saloon three blocks away and Rod pressed his body against a tree trunk. He saw that it was the blacksmith, and he went on up the street.

IT WAS near the Prairie Queen Saloon that he saw Turk Travis. The big man was out in the street, hatless, weaving from side to side. He had his gun in his hand and he was keeping up a running fire of threats to the amusement of a half-dozen Lacey Prentice men who stood by the hitch-rack, goading him on. As Rod came near he could catch a few words.

"I'll shoot my initials in the double-crossin' son," Travis bellowed drunkenly. "I'll shoot my initials in him."

"Do you know your initials, Turk?" someone taunted. The men roared with

laughter. Rod Silvers felt his stomach knot.

Turk stood there, his gun waving in the air. It would be suicide to meet the man with guns now, and yet until he did there would be no sleep in this town for Rod Silvers. He glanced at the men on the porch and recognized them all. They were favorites to whom the no-gun ordinance had never applied, but even in that Rod found some hope. Those men lived by the gun and like Pete Martin they had certain rules. They would hesitate to shoot an unarmed man, for to do so would rob them of the very thrill for which they lived. Turk Travis stumbled over his own feet, and the men hooted. Rod Silvers took a deep breath and unbuckled his gunbelt. Hanging it carefully over a nearby hitchrack he walked slowly into the puddle of light there in front of the Prairie Queen.

He didn't wait for them to see him before he called out. "If you're men enough," he said, "go take that popgun away from that drunken baboon and I'll handle him my way. I'm not armed."

He came boldly forward then, his arms out from his side. The men on the sidewalk he could trust, but Travis was drunk. His stomach recoiled against the thought of hot lead smashing there. Turk Travis weaved back and forth, trying to focus his eyes. He became suddenly sober. His arm snapped up and the gun flashed flame. Dust spouted two feet in front of the marshal. "I said I didn't have a gun," Rod Silvers said.

Three men went out in the street and took Turk's smoking gun away from him. They went back to their place in front of the saloon then, and the street was silent. Men, attracted by the shot, seemed to walk on the balls of their feet as they came to see.

Rod Silvers walked steadily forward to meet the barrel-chested man in the street. He was half Turk's bulk, but he had a wiry quickness about him and he had tested his fists before and found them not wanting. There was no fear in him, only hatred.

When they were three feet apart Turk Travis started to laugh. The whole thing had suddenly become funny to him and the laugh choked off in a grunt as he made a wild swing at the advancing marshal. Rod Silvers chopped the thick arm aside with his shoulder and in the same motion landed a blow on Turk's chin.

The big man stumbled back, then started to laugh again, low in his throat. "This is what I been waiting for, Silvers," he said, rubbing his jaw. "This is just what I been waiting for." He reeled forward, his thick arms swinging.

Rod avoided the first charge and managed to rip a blow into Turk's face, but it had no effect. Turk turned stiffly in his tracks and smashed his hairy fist against Rod's head with a force that sent the marshal spilling into the dust.

He rolled to avoid Turk's boot, threw both arms around the gunman's leg and jerked him off his feet. The fall stunned the big man, and Rod pounded his fists into Turk's face until his hands were slippery with blood. But Turk Travis would not stay down. Hunching himself he got his feet in the pit of Rod's stomach and shoved. Rod landed on his back, ten feet away.

He bounced up like a rubber ball and got Turk while he was on his hands and knees. As Turk went down Rod stepped back and smashed his boot into the big man's face. He kicked again, with all his strength and seemed to feel bone give way.

Rod could see or feel nothing now. It was almost as if he had waited for violence like this for five years—those years of begging for a job; the turmoil that made him decide to take the easy way; these last months in Bainville where the easy way had proven itself to be the hardest of his life; his love for Lucille Brown; the environment he was shaping for his daughter—

All these things were real in Rod Silvers during these seconds, and all of them expressed themselves in violence. He threw himself on the bleeding hulk of Turk Travis and beat with his fists until it seemed the bones in his arms must be shattered. Then he stood up, panting, blood dripping from his mouth and his nose. His coat hung in ribbons and his shirt was ripped down the front, exposing his naked chest. Red devils of hot pain raced through an old wound in his leg. One of the girls from the Prairie Queen was screaming and a man slapped her across the face. It was deathly quiet then.

Rod Silvers' legs were trembling under him when he started to walk away from the crowd who stood staring morbidly at the bleeding broken thing that moaned there in the dust of the street. "Tell him to be out of town come morning," Rod said, and he turned his back on them.

He was safe now, he knew, for he had marked himself as Turk's man and no one would touch him until Turk had his chance. After that a dozen guns would seek him out, but for these few hours he was safe. He went to where he had left his gun and buckled it on. Then he crossed to the hotel to his room to change his clothes and wash his wounds. After that he'd ride out to the bottoms to see the nesters. He'd tell them that things had changed in Bainville and when they came again there'd be no one at the bridge to take their guns.

HE TOOK the bridge road out of town because it was the only way, and before the changing of the wind told him it was midnight he knew that trouble had been here before him. He rode slowly then, for no rider would be welcome here tonight.

There was a smell of wood smoke and burning cloth hanging in the hollows, and mingled with the sporadic barking of dogs were the muttered voices of men trying to quiet panic-stricken animals. Far to the left, a bonfire blazed and the moving shapes threw grotesque shadows. He rode that way, calling out his name as he went. He was met by set faces and readied rifles. There were women there with the men and some of them were crying.

The men did not speak, but they shifted their weight and the sound of a shell being levered into a rifle was sharp and clear above the crackling of the fire. A boy of ten took a dipperful of water from a bucket, drank hastily and threw the rest on the ground. A woman reached out and slapped him across the mouth. "I told you not to waste water," she said.

Rod let his eyes wander around the circle of faces. He saw the young nester with the bolt of checkered calico. He was holding it close as if it were all that was left and he was crying openly. Rod went to him and jerked him to his feet. The nester did not fight back. He held the cloth tightly. "Tell me about it," Rod said, shaking the man roughly.

"She was doing what she could to help," the nester said. "It was after Craig Collins was killed and they had burned his place." The kid was smiling now and he kept stroking the bolt of cloth. "They was going to set fire to our place and she kept saying 'This is our home. They can't do this to us.' They shot her down when she went to the door."

A woman came forward and put her arm around the young nester's waist. "You need rest, Clem," she said. "This won't do no good. You're talkin' to one of them now."

"Get back to Lacey Prentice, Marshal," an old man named Forrest said. "Maybe we can't hold ourselves much longer."

The woman was leading the young nester away from the fire. He still held on to the bolt of calico goods. There was an unnatural brightness in his eyes as the firelight caught there and held. He said, "It was Pete Martin done it. He's your deputy and it was him that done it." He stopped suddenly as if the whole thing had become clear to him.

He broke away from the woman and snatched a rifle from one of the men. The bolt of calico was forgotten now as he swung the gun around in a wide arc and started laughing crazily. Rod Silvers stepped forward quickly and cracked his fist against the point of the young nester's chin. As he staggered back, Rod caught him and passed him into the arms of a man standing near.

"He needs some rest," Rod Silvers said.

"I know."

"You better get out of here, Marshal," the oldster intoned again.

"I'll go when I've had my say," he said.

"We ain't interested in your new ordinances now," Forrest said. "You made a big show there in town today, but you didn't stop this raid tonight. We're tired of being gunned into keeping up with a one-sided law while Lacey Prentice forces us against the wall. There's some hot-blooded ones here want to get at it, and I'm of a mind to give the word. We aim to make a few rules of our own after that, Marshal."

"I come to tell you I'm taking sides with you," Rod Silvers said softly. "I've

told Turk Travis to get out of town by morning and I'll lock Pete Martin and Lacey Prentice up when I get back to town."

Forrest laughed, a short, clipped laugh not like an old man's chuckle. He said, "We trust you like we trust a snake, Marshal. We got ropes sized for you and your deputies."

Rod Silvers felt a quick chill run up the back of his neck. He kept thinking of the young nester's wife. She had been so young and alive this afternoon. It reminded him of another night. He looked at the bleak faces around him, cut deep by the shadows of the fire. They were men with beliefs and souls. They were like the men in the book Lucille had given Susie. He said, "Maybe you'd trust the sheriff, then. He wasn't appointed by Lacey Prentice."

His statement met with silence. Then Forrest said, "You and Prentice been able to keep him out of this end of the county so far. What makes you think he'll come now?"

"Because I'll send for him and tell him the truth," Rod Silvers said.

There was a quick flurry of interest among the men, but Forrest shook his head. "I don't believe it, Silvers," he said flatly. "If Sheriff Al Sanberg ever got close enough to Bainville to find out what was going on, you'd wind up in jail as quick as any of 'em and you know it." He laughed that short clipped laugh again. "You ain't got that much guts, Silvers."

Rod felt the slow resentment burning along his cheeks but he knew that the blame was not with Forrest and his men. They had been tricked too long by a Lacey Prentice-controlled law that ran Bainville and the surrounding township in its own way. Sheriff Al Sanberg had his troubles to the north and Lacey Prentice knew the people that could keep him out of this end of the county. Only a flat confession of truth from Rod Silvers could bring the sheriff here fast with the twenty or so men he would need to keep order. But it could be done if Rod Silvers wanted to trade his star for a pair of steel bracelets. He said, "I'll write it now and give it to you if you want. One of your men can deliver it." His voice sounded far away to his own ears.

The old man studied him intently. Finally he said, "You got something up your sleeve but it's bound to fall out. It won't hurt to see what you write." He called for pencil and paper and they brought a lantern and a box for a desk.

Rod Silvers wrote carefully and thoughtfully, and when he was finished he signed it Rod Silvers, Marshal of Bainville, then he handed the paper across to Forrest. The old man read it, his expression never changing, and he passed it around the circle of men. Some grinned sheepishly and handed it along, then leaned toward their neighbors to find out what the written words had said.

It was simple the way he had phrased it. It was addressed to the sheriff of the county and it asked for immediate help. It described the situation accurately and truthfully and it notified the sheriff that Pete Martin and Turk Travis had been relieved of their duty as deputy marshals and that Rod Silvers was ready to give himself up to make way for honest law in Bainville. The last man read it and handed it back to Forrest. The light of the fire flashed in the hard eyes of men as every face turn toward Rod Silvers. The old man looked at the marshal and said, "Why?"

"Because sometimes a skunk gets tired of his own stink," Rod Silvers said.

Forrest folded the note carefully and motioned to one of the men. "We'll send Jake Butler with it," he said, handing the note over to a grinning redhead that Rod knew well. "We'll wait then until Jake gets back. If anything goes wrong we still got a rope that fits your neck."

"Take the south trail across the burned country, Jake," Rod Silvers said, "and ride like hell. I'll do what I can to keep Pete Martin from coming back here before the sheriff gets here."

Jake Butler said, "If you're on the level we'll see you get a fair trial." He hurried out into the darkness then and Rod heard him saddling a horse. There was nothing more he could do. He mounted his own horse and rode back the way he had come, toward the distant night glow that was Bainville.

Dawn was rimming the hills with light and an abutment of clouds pushed gray fingers into the receding night. The un-

natural quiet of morning was everywhere. It would be daylight soon, and Rod Silvers knew that Turk Travis would still be in Bainville. He checked the loads in his six-shooter and headed for town and the job he would have to do.

CHAPTER THREE

A Killer Sides a Lawman

THE drumming of his horse's hoofs on the curving bridge into Bainville announced Rod's coming. He made no attempt to hide his movements, for it was too early for the town to be stirring. The unexpected sight of the saddled horses and men hurrying down the street toward the bridge made him pull up sharp and he drew the carbine from its saddle scabbard.

Even in the half-light he could recognize that they were Lacey Prentice men. They were carrying picks and shovels, and two men toted a heavy case. Another had a coil like fine rope looped over his arm. When they saw Rod Silvers they hesitated, then came on, more slowly. Pete Martin's voice came out of the shadows. It said, "Ride on in, Marshal. Anyone makes a move I'll gut-shoot him. Turk's waitin' for you down by the Prairie Queen."

He rode slowly then, holding his horse in, not able to figure out what sort of trap they were laying for him. When he was opposite the harness shed near Lockhart's butcher shop, Pete Martin came out to meet him. The young gunman held a carbine in his hand. "I want to talk to you, Rod," he said flatly.

Rod dismounted slowly and left his horse ground-tied in the street. He walked toward Pete Martin, keeping his hands away from his guns. Pete Martin leaned his rifle against the wall of the butcher shop and deliberately rolled a cigarette. "We got nothing to talk about, Pete," Rod Silvers said.

"Know a man named Jake Butler?" Pete Martin said softly.

Rod remembered the red-headed nester who had been sent with the note. He felt a tightness pulling the corners of his lips. He said nothing.

"I killed him this morning," Pete Martin said easily. The smoke trailed out with his words. "He had a letter on him to Sheriff Al Sanberg. Somebody had forged your name to it."

"They didn't forge it," Rod Silvers said. The palms of his hands had suddenly become moist.

"I told Lacey Prentice they did," Pete said flatly. "And I told Lucille and Susie you sent word to get ready to leave now. They're all packed and waitin' for you over at Lucille's place."

"You took a lot for granted," Rod Silvers said.

He didn't see the blur of movement until Pete Martin's gun was level with his belt buckle. It was lighter now and the gunman's eyes were white-rimmed and hard. He spoke out of one side of his mouth as if the words were difficult to say. He said, "Susie is the only thing in this world that ever took the time to like me. You ain't no good to her dead. Get goin' quick, and tell Lucille what I said was the gospel."

There was no mistaking the ring in Pete Martin's voice or the menace of the six-shooter in his hand, so Rod angled across the street to the corner and then took the tree-lined street that led the short block to Lucille Brown's house. He walked slowly, measuring each step, and he felt Pete Martin's nervousness. At last he said, "I won't do it, Pete."

"It won't be healthy here in another hour or so," Pete Martin said ominously. "I left that jigger's carcass where the nesters could find it. They'll be comin' in to settle up now and it won't be healthy for women and kids, maybe. Not your women and kids, leastwise. There'll always be one or two gets away and maybe they might figger you led 'em into this fight, Rod."

"Maybe they're stronger than you think," Rod Silvers said flatly. "Lacey Prentice ain't God."

"I don't know about them things," Pete Martin said, "but I know dynamite when I see it. They'll have to cross that bridge and most of 'em will cross at one time. If that don't work, a dozen rifles in upstairs windows will. I've talked Lacey Prentice into giving you another chance and you'll take your own chance with Turk Travis, but I can't talk a crippled nester into lettin' you or your folks alone. I don't give a

damn about you, Rod, and I never did. You ain't one thing or the other, but I don't want nothin' happenin' to Susie that I can stop. I'm stayin' here by this fence, Rod, and if I have to, I'll gun you all the way out of town. Go get in that wagon and start drivin' fast!"

He could see the buckboard now, standing under the twin cottonwoods that stood on either side of the small barn back of Lucille's place. The wagon was piled high with a quick collection of household goods and Susie's treasures. Lucille came out the side door of the house and stood peering into the gray light. She had a scarf tied tightly around her head and she was wearing a long gray gown that flared full at the hips. Rod Silvers went up to her and when she saw him she threw her arms around him and sobbed softly. "I'm glad you decided, Rod," she said, kissing him. "It's better like this. Susie's all ready."

"I'm not going, Lucille," he said, and when she would have protested he held her close in his arms and squeezed her hand until he felt her wince. "Listen to what I tell you," he said.

TO PETE MARTIN, out there in the half light, it would have looked as if they were standing there together, talking over their plans of escape. He could not see the fear drained face of Lucille and the tight lipped determination that shaped Rod Silvers' mouth as he gave his instructions.

"You can get fresh horses at Moody's place," he told her. "You gotta drive at a run all the way, and you gotta see that the sheriff gets here by dark. Somehow I'll hold the nesters off until then, but I can't hold out longer than that because after that Lacey Prentice will figure out some other way to get them. When I jump clear, stand up and whip 'em into a lather. Explain to Susie the way you think best."

"You can still change your mind, Rod," Lucille Brown said. "It wouldn't make any difference between us. I'd rather have you alive than a dead hero."

"It's not a matter of being a hero," he told her seriously. "It's just what a man has to do." He helped her into the buckboard. Then he stood there, one foot on the step, looking up at her. The sun came up and tinged her face with a ruddy glow of new life and he saw the tears in her eyes. Susie came running out of the house, clutching the new doll Pete Martin had given her.

"Is Uncle Pete going with us?" she called as she hurried toward the wagon.

"Not right now," Rod Silvers said. He knew Susie's voice must have carried to where Pete Martin waited with his gun.

Rod helped his daughter into the wagon, made her comfortable in a spot behind the seat. It was a place where she would be protected if need be, and yet she could hold on for support as the buckboard careened its way toward Sheriff Al Sanberg at the county seat. After that Rod stepped up and took the lines. He clucked to the matched bay team and cut the wagon around and headed down the street toward the north entrance to town where the road wound up across the shoulder of the hills. As he passed the corner he caught a quick glimpse of Pete Martin. He looked as if he were blowing a kiss toward the departing wagon.

They turned into the main street of Bainville and the sun was on their backs. They were half-way to the Prairie Queen Saloon when Lucille leaned close and her voice broke. "Don't do it, Rod," she pleaded.

He smiled down at her and clucked to the team. There was a half-smile in his gray eyes and laugh-lines that had been absent for five years cut the corners of his generous mouth. He said, "Recollect those little blue paper stars you paste on the kids' slates at school?" She nodded, and the unshed tears spilled from her eyes. "For playin' games according to the rules, ain't they?"

She didn't need to say anything, for she knew there would be no changing him. They were a half-block from the Prairie Queen now. She leaned over and kissed him hard on the mouth. Susie, all eyes, said, "Why did you do that?"

"Because I love him," Lucille Brown said proudly.

It happened fast then. He handed her the lines and she stood up quickly, bracing herself against the seat. Rod jerked his gun and fired twice as Lucille screamed at the team and slashed with the ends of the lines. The bays hesitated, sawing against

the bits, then broke into a runaway plunge down the main street of Bainville. Rod could hear Susie's scream as he threw himself from the wagon and hit rolling in the deep dust of the street. At the same second he saw Turk Travis come out the front door of the saloon.

FOR A SECOND Turk Travis stood there, the new sun making a brutal mask of his battered and swollen face. He waved his left hand then to hold the others back, and he stepped off the porch and planted his feet firmly in the dust of the street. Rod Silvers, the breath knocked out of him, was on his knees, half crouched over. He saw Turk move for his gun and he heard Pete Martin running up behind him. He took his chance with Pete and he fell to the left, tugging his gun free as he did. From the choking cloud of dust raised by his falling body he fired up at the towering frame of Turk Travis. He saw Turk's gun spout and felt the hot lacing fire in his hip.

Twice more he fired and Turk's next bullet spouted a geyser of dust near him. He fired again, more deliberate this time, and saw Turk start walking forward. The big man was holding his gun loosely now. He took two steps, slowly, then started walking rapidly. Rod could not see the look on his face. When he was half-way across the street his head began to jerk with his steps, more and more, until at last it seemed to unbalance him and he fell forward, arms sprawled above his head. Rod Silvers felt the muzzle of Pete Martin's gun against the back of his neck. "Get up," Pete Martin's voice said.

Rod forced himself to his feet and when his left leg threatened to give way under him he gritted his teeth against the pain and stood anyway. He could feel the perspiration popping out on his forehead, but he turned and faced Pete Martin. He said, "Why don't you put it back in the holster and give me an even break, Pete?" He felt the sneer curl his lip. "Or is that expecting too much from a man who goes around killing women?"

For a second he thought that Pete Martin was going to pull the trigger, then the killer light left the young gunman's eyes and he lowered the gun. "Why did you do it?" he snapped.

"What?" Rod said, twisting his mouth against the pain in his leg. "Kill Turk? I had to."

"You damn well know I don't mean that. I told you to get out of town." The gun bored into his back.

A ring of men had formed around Pete and Rod now. They paid no attention to the body of Turk, sprawled there where he had fallen. Rod let his eyes rove over the circle of faces. They were all men he knew, for at one time or another in his career as marshal of Bainville, Rod Silvers had overlooked the lawbreaking of each one of them. It was always the same. Some prospector lost his poke in the Prairie Queen. A dozen cattle turned up missing. A payroll failed to get to its destination.

Whatever Lacey Prentice decided and whomever he decided to have do it. That was the way it worked. Lacey Prentice was the master mind. Rod caught himself wondering just how many of these men had ever actually seen Lacey Prentice, and the hair raised along the nape of his neck. Lacey Prentice himself was standing in the door of the Prairie Queen, eyeing him coldly.

Only once before had Rod Silvers seen the boss of Bainville come out in the open, and that night six men had died. Lacey Prentice did not believe in lowering himself to mixing with his men. He gave his gunsmoke orders to Pete Martin, his segundo, and he kept to his room like a phantom power that was always present. Men obeyed the orders Lacey Prentice gave, for they had learned it was best that way. If Lacey Prentice planned a thing, it would not fail, and a man could come back with his skin in one piece and a jingle in his pocket. A strange silence fell over the men as they turned and saw the hulking mountain of man blocking the doorway of the Prairie Queen Saloon.

Lacey Prentice was fat. He completely filled the doorway, and yet there was a certain leanness about the way he looked. He was dressed immaculately and wore a white Panama hat that slouched loosely around his moon-like face. He had small beady eyes that glittered out between puffy lids. Perspiration made dark wavy lines down a pale lavender silk shirt. The cigars protruding from the breast pocket of his

white linen coat seemed to droop from the heat of the man. He said, "Good morning, Rod. I thought you'd be dead by now." He had a soft, pleasant voice.

Every man in that group moved aside when they heard his voice, and they formed two lines, with Pete Martin and Rod Silvers in the center. Pete had not bothered to take Rod's gun and the fact that he hadn't only added to Rod's sense of hopelessness. He felt himself getting sick as the blood from the wound in his leg dripped down into his boot. He swayed slightly against Martin and felt the gun come up and jab into his side. Lacey Prentice moved forward swiftly and when he moved like that Rod was never conscious of the man's three hundred pounds of weight.

"Everything ready?" Prentice snapped. His voice cracked like a pistol shot. "Got the powder set? They'll be coming in another half-hour." The crack went out of his voice as a dozen men nodded him a yes. He said, "Don't kill the marshal yet, Pete. Maybe we'll leave him for his friends across the river."

The arrogance of the man touched off a spark in Rod Silvers that he could not control. Standing here he saw plainly the time he had wasted listening to orders from this power-mad killer, and although he knew that one way or another he would die he knew he would use his remaining time fighting. He said, "Maybe you won't have things so easy once the sheriff gets here, Lacey. You didn't appoint him—the people elected him."

Lacey Prentice smiled broadly. "Haven't you told him about his messenger, Pete? Pete's a good man, Rod. He'll live comfortably when the railroad comes to Bainville. Too bad you're not as smart as Pete. No, Rod, that message you sent didn't get to the sheriff."

"Maybe that one didn't," Rod said levelly, "but the one I sent this morning will and regardless of what you do to me or those nesters you'll never live to enjoy it. You can't get away from a posse of fifty men."

A cloud of worry crossed the fat man's face and tamed the glitter in his eyes, but it was Pete Martin who caught the meaning of what Rod had said.

"Lucille," he murmured.

Become an Expert Accountant

The Profession That Pays

The demand for skilled accountants—*men who really know their business*—is increasing. National and state legislation is requiring of business—both big and small—much more in matters relating to Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important field are promoted to responsible executive positions—given an opportunity to earn real salaries. The range is from $3,000 to $10,000 a year, even to higher income figures.

Send for Free Book—

"Accountancy, the Profession That Pays"

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you may equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable, growing profession?

Knowledge of bookkeeping unnecessary. Our free book on accountancy fully explains how we train you from ground up, or according to your individual needs. Low cost; easy terms.

The facts about the new LaSalle training in Accountancy and the opportunities in this highly profitable field are clearly outlined in a 48-page book which LaSalle will send you *free*.

The man in earnest to get ahead will find this coupon a most profitable aid to progress. If you have the urge and the will to increase your income, clip and mail the coupon NOW.

G. I. APPROVED

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

Dept. 2334-HA 417 So. Dearborn St. Chicago 5

I would welcome details of opportunities in accounting, together with copy of "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," without obligation.

☐ **Higher Accountancy**

Other LaSalle Opportunities:
LaSalle opens the way to success in every important field of business. If interested in one of the fields below, check and mail.

☐ Business Management
☐ Modern Salesmanship
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Foremanship
☐ Industrial Management
☐ Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)
☐ Law—Degree of LL.B.
☐ Commercial Law
☐ Modern Business Correspondence
☐ Expert Bookkeeping
☐ C.P.A. Coaching

Name.....

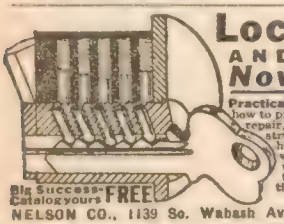
Present Position.....

Address.....

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE
Borrow $50 to $300
Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow BY MAIL $50.00 to $300.00 this easy quick *confidential* way.
BY MAIL
IT IS EASY TO BORROW BY MAIL!
Completely confidential and private.
Convenient Monthly Payments
NO ENDORSERS NEEDED
EMPLOYED MEN and women of good character can solve their money problems quickly and in privacy with loans MADE BY MAIL. No endorsers or co-signers. We do not contact employers, friends or relatives. Convenient monthly payments. Send us your name and address and we will mail application blank and complete details FREE in plain envelope. There is no obligation.
STATE FINANCE CO.
311 Walker Bank Bldg., Dept. G-71, Salt Lake City 9, Utah

LAW
STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 38 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance"—NOW!
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 74-B, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

START YOUR OWN BUSINESS
on our capital. Always your own boss. Hundreds average $6,000 to $25,000 annual sales year after year. We supply stocks, equipment on credit. 200 home necessities. Selling experience unnecessary to start. Wonderful opportunity to own pleasant, profitable business backed by world wide industry. Write RAWLEIGH CO., Dept. B-U-PBL, Freeport, Illinois.


Locksmithing
AND KEY MAKING
Now Made Easy!
Practical up-to-date course teaches you how to pick locks, de-code, make masterkeys, repair, install, service, etc. New self-instruction lessons for every handyman, homeowner, carpenter, mechanic, service station operator, fix-it shop, hardware dealer, gunsmith. 53 easy illustrated lessons. Low price! Satisfaction! Free details, write
Big Success Catalog yours FREE
NELSON CO., 1139 So. Wabash Ave., Dept. B05, Chicago 5, Ill.

Ready to Highball
—with a clear board for February, Railroad Magazine is out on the mainline again with a full consist of fact articles, photo stories and fiction. $2.50 by the year. Address:
RAILROAD MAGAZINE
205 East 42nd Street, New York City 17

DON'T SUFFER FROM SKIN IRRITATION
due to ✓chafing from braces, trusses, girdles, corsets, etc. ✓bed sores ✓itching
NEW! Get wonderful new quick relief from skin irritation, itching, burning due to friction, rubbing, chafing—with amazing new Mennen QUICOOL powder! New scientific formula perfected by Mennen skin specialists—works fast, helps prevent and relieve chafing, bed sores, many externally-caused rashes. Wonderful too for baby's diaper rash, prickly heat, etc. Smooth on mild, soothing QUICOOL powder after bath also—refreshing, light scent. Get QUICOOL now for entire family. GUARANTEE: Double your money back if not satisfied.
QUICK! GET MENNEN QUICOOL

"That's right, Pete," Rod Silvers said softly. "It's your turn to get out quick."

LACEY PRENTICE had not been able to hear the few words that had passed between Pete Martin and Rod Silvers, but he sensed something wrong and came on into the street until his bulking frame was pressed close to Rod. His hand, thin and hard in spite of his fat, snaked out like a whip and caught Rod by the shirt front. "What did you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Wait and see, Lacey," Rod said tightly.

The hand came back and lashed out against Rod's face with a resounding crack. Rod staggered back and sat down hard. The wound in his leg spurted fresh blood. "I asked you a question, Rod," Lacey Prentice said softly. He drew one foot back.

"The girl is on her way after the sheriff now," Pete Martin said.

"She is, eh?" Lacey Prentice said.

"Let's get the hell out of here, boss," Pete Martin said, that quick nervousness in his voice. "No lousy piece of land is worth hanging for."

"I think I'm still giving the orders around here," Lacey Prentice said easily. His right elbow accidentally brushed his coat aside. He was wearing a gun in a special holster that hung from a shoulder strap.

"You can't fight a whole army," Pete Martin said hotly. "There's a time when good sense should tell you that."

"Who said anything about fighting a whole army?" Lacey Prentice said. His voice was dangerously low. He turned and looked at the men around him and there was a smile on his face. "You, Varga," he said. "Keele and Arizona, too. Take the best horses you can find and ride 'em until they drop. Take the short-cut across the hills. Stop that girl before she gets to Landry City!"

There was no mistaking the meaning of the fat man's orders and as the three men named stepped out Rod realized he could not have called on more dependable ones. Varga was a half-breed Mex with a knife scar that split his lower lip. He bragged

of the men he had killed and twice the town of Bainville had seen the deadliness of him. He licked his split lip and rolled his words when he spoke. "She's a good-looker," he said.

Keele was a tall skeleton of a man with a funeral voice. He had deep-socketed eyes and his skin was an unhealthy blue. Men talked freely of the time he had beaten a horse to death with a piece of pipe after the animal had accidentally stepped on his foot. He did not smile, because he never did, but he nodded his agreement to Lacey Prentice.

The man called Arizona had one eye. A slanting scar across his forehead hinted at what had become of the other. He had a quick nervous way about him and his hand was constantly near the gun in his belt, although that was not the weapon he used. He was Lacey Prentice's rifleman, and there was not a man in the state, so far as was known, who could beat him on a long distance shot. It mattered little to him what he shot, just so he hit his target. A girl in a bouncing buckboard would be a good target.

Rod Silvers felt every nerve in his body deaden as he looked from the grinning face of Lacey Prentice to the three men who were moving to get their horses. He pulled himself to his knees, then to his feet, and he felt his wounded leg give way under him. In spite of the twenty men around him and Pete Martin's gun in his back Rod staggered to his feet and drew his gun. With the muzzle leveled at Lacey Prentice's chest he said, "Call 'em back, Lacey, or I'll blast you to hell!"

The look that crossed the fat man's face was more annoyance than fear. Pete Martin could pull the trigger of his gun before Rod could fire or any one of a dozen men could knock the wounded marshal down. Prentice hardly noticed the gun that was aimed at his bulging middle. The three men had stopped and were coming back slowly, their guns half drawn. The fat man saw them and his voice cracked his order. "I told you to stop that woman," he said.

Pete Martin's voice was barely audible when he said, "Not so fast, Lacey. I'm backing Rod's play!"

THE BROMPTON MECHANICAL PENCIL

ALL METAL — ALUMINUM

The Mechanical Pencil

Better Looking of Unusual Interest

This is the pencil that is arousing so much interest wherever it is on display . . DIFFERENT . . UNUSUAL and VERY ATTRACTIVE. Precision is built into the BROMPTON PENCIL to LAST and SERVE with FAITHFUL PERFORMANCE . . You will instantly notice the difference . . It catches the eye.

the pencil you will be proud to carry

In 4 ATTRACTIVE COLORS it gives you the preference of color that you like best in a precision built pencil made of DURABLE ALUMINUM built for long and faithful service.

in very attractive colors: MAROON, BLUE, BLACK AND NATURAL

ON SALE EVERYWHERE FOR ONLY $1.00

If your dealer does not have them . . then mail order direct.

BROMPTON SALES CO. Dept. P-2
3171 No. Halsted St. CHICAGO 13

AUTHENTIC WESTERN SADDLE RING

FOR MEN! & WOMEN!

PURE STERLING SILVER

Only $4.95

Postpaid We Pay Tax

CUT OUT THIS BAND TO FIND RING SIZE

First time at anywhere near this low price! Authentic replica of romantic western saddle. Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver by Navajo Indian craftsmen. Massive style for men, dainty style for women. A gift of distinction. A pleasure to wear. Sent on approval.

SEND NO MONEY! Just clip this ad and mail with your name and address. Pay postman only $4.95 plus few cents postage on arrival; or send cash and we pay postage. Wear this sensational ring for 10 days. If not delighted, return for full refund. ORDER NOW! USE COUPON BELOW!

10 DAY TRIAL ORDER COUPON

ARIZONA CRAFTSMEN ROOM 617C
1904 FARNAM ST. OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

SEND Sterling Saddle Ring as I have indicated below.

☐ C.O.D. ☐ Cash Enclosed, Send Postpaid

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

☐ Men's ☐ Women's Ring Size _____

FOOT RELIEF
in 2 minutes!

DO THIS DAILY: Get wonderful quick relief and healthier feet with this exercise recommended by most Chiropodists (foot specialists). Bend feet under, flex from side to side, curl toes down, spread toes apart; repeat 10 times. Then massage feet, and between toes, with soothing Mennen QUINSANA fungicidal foot powder. Comforts, peps up feet. Amazingly effective against Athlete's Foot, excessive perspiration, foot odor. Shake QUINSANA in shoes daily. Get QUINSANA now for greater foot comfort.

MENNEN QUINSANA

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-249, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

TOOTHACHE?
DUE TO CAVITY

GET quick, amazing relief by placing Dent's Tooth Gum—or Drops—in cavity of aching tooth. Follow directions. Cavity toothache frequently strikes when you can't see dentist. Be prepared. Ask your druggist for package. Keep handy for children, too.

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS 25¢

MAKE $35 SUIT YOURS NEW PLAN

EARN CASH SHOWING TO FRIENDS!

Write at once if you want this fine made-to-measure suit! You can get it by taking a few orders from friends, and earn up to $10, $12 in a day. Your bonus suit helps you take more orders with latest style, made-to-measure **guaranteed** suits at amazingly low prices. Also complete line of Ladies' Tailored Suits. No experience, no money needed. Write TODAY for FREE SAMPLES—telling about yourself—age, etc. No obligation!

PIONEER TAILORING CO. Congress and Throop Streets, Dept. P-1096, Chicago 7, Ill.

NEW CHEAP OIL BURNER
FOR COOKING & HEATING STOVES-FURNACES

HEAT YOUR HOME, COOK YOUR MEALS WITH CHEAP FURNACE OIL

NO MORE SHOVELING COAL OR ASHES. A New Fuelizer Starter Vaporizing System turns Cheap 130 Flash Furnace Oil, Distillate, Kerosene, etc. into Oil Gas heat without clogging up. LIFETIME GUARANTEE against defects. $1.00 Bonus Offer for Testing. We will let you try it in your own stove or furnace for one month. Get yours for introducing. Big Profits QUICK. Be first. Send in your name TODAY.

NORTHWEST MFG. CO., 556-8 5th, Mitchell, So. Dakota

ITCH
CHECKED IN A JIFFY

Sufferers from the torturing itch caused by eczema, pimples, scales, scabies, athlete's foot, "factory" itch, and other itch troubles are praising cooling, liquid **D. D. D. Prescription.** This time-proved medication—developed by Dr. D. D. Dennis—positively relieves that cruel, burning itch. Greaseless and stainless. Soothes and comforts even the most intense itching in a jiffy. A 35c trial bottle proves its merits or your money back. Ask your druggist today for **D. D. D. Prescription.**

CHAPTER FOUR

Dynamite!

IN THE deadening silence that followed, Lacey Prentice proved that he was no coward. He stood there smiling, as he looked first at Rod Silvers and then at his segundo, Pete Martin. Not once did his eyes go to the two guns that bored steadily at his chest. He said, "I kill men who cross me, Pete. You've been around long enough to know that."

"You're not getting the teacher and the kid mixed up in this," Pete Martin said flatly.

Rod's vision blurred as a wave of pain surged through his leg and he staggered slightly. He could see Lacey Prentice smiling at him and he knew that when the gunplay started he would be tagged for the first bullet. Keele and Arizona had come back now and were standing just back of the fat man, their hands ready. Varga, always the one to play it safe, was angling in from the side.

Rod Silvers remembered that he had never in his life seen such a draw as the fat man made. His hand never seemed to move and then it was holding a gun and he was weaving back and forth as that gun spouted flame.

Varga took his time and lined his sights on Pete Martin. Rod could almost see the thoughts running through the half-breed's mind. He was thinking of what it would mean to be the man who killed Pete Martin. His gun was raised and there was a wide grin on his knife-scarred face when Rod Silvers sent a bullet crashing into his half-open mouth.

Rod turned his attention to Keele and Arizona then, but he saw that Pete Martin had accounted for them. Arizona was still on his feet, but he was breaking at the knees and he had both hands clutched to his stomach. Lacey Prentice was still smiling, and his gun still bucked in his hand. Then as suddenly as it had started it was silent, and Rod realized that three seconds had not passed.

Only then did the fight mean anything, and only then did he realize that he was violently sick. He turned and saw Pete

Martin standing there, a gun in each hand. The kid's lips were drawn tight and his eyes held a glittering hardness. Rod felt as if he were losing consciousness, but he realized that Lacey Prentice was still standing there. He tried to turn his gun that way, and he lost his balance and fell. As he did he vaguely saw the hulking mountain of flesh that was Lacey Prentice collapse into the dust of the street.

Realizing that Lacey Prentice was dead brought Rod back to his senses with a snap. He tried to get up and he felt Pete Martin's left hand grab him by the collar and help him to his feet. The young gunman stood there, the gun in his right hand covering the white-faced men who stood by their dead companions piled grotesquely in the street. "Anybody else want some?" Pete Martin asked. There was no answer and he added, "I'm giving the orders around here now."

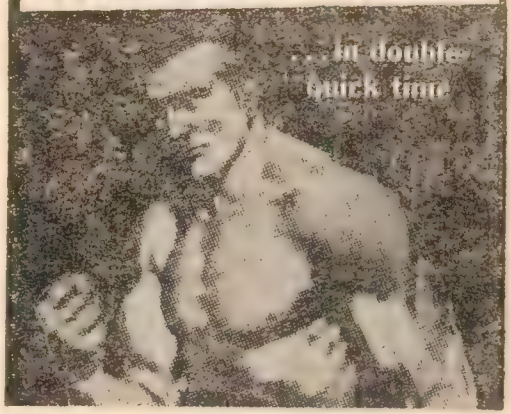
There was an ominous stillness in the town of Bainville as the last shot echoed back from the hills and on that stillness came the rumbling of wagons and the sound of voices. Every eye turned and a half-mile down the bridge road the first teams of the nesters came round the bend. Pete Martin snapped his orders as if he had planned every move.

"Any one man in those wagons can hang us," he said flatly. "Let 'em come as we planned. When they get on the bridge Fritz will touch off the powder. If that don't work, our hide-out guns will wipe 'em out. After that it's every man for himself and I'll see you all in Hell!" He turned abruptly, half-dragging Rod Silvers along with him and as Rod stumbled close to the gunman he felt his shirt grow slimy with blood. He looked down quickly and realized that Pete Martin's stomach was bleeding from one of Lacey Prentice's slugs.

They walked away, Pete Martin and Rod Silvers, and with every step they took Rod knew that the life was running out of that gaping hole in Pete Martin's stomach.

"We never understood each other, Rod," the gunman said, "and we never will. In another ten minutes I'll be dead, and I don't give a damn, but before I go I'm backing

"Let me show YOU too, HOW TO MAKE YOURSELF COMMANDO-TOUGH



...OR IT WON'T COST YOU A CENT!"
says George F. Jowett
WORLD'S GREATEST BODY BUILDER
Let me prove to YOU that you can put inches of dynamic muscles on your arms! Add inches to your chest! Broaden your shoulders and power-pack the rest of your body. I can do for you what I've done for thousands the world over, including many officers and men now in the U. S. and British Armed Forces!
GIVE ME 10 MINUTES A DAY!
I'll Show You My Secrets of Body Building
I'll help you learn the "Progressive Power Method" through which I rebuilt myself from a physical wreck to the holder of more strength records than any other living athlete or teacher! No matter how skinny or flabby you are, you can learn my methods right in your own home. Through my proved secrets I show you how to develop your power, inside and out, until YOU are fully satisfied that you are the man you want to be. "The Jowett System," says R. F. Kelly, Physical Director of the YMCA, Atlantic City, "is the greatest in the world!"
PROVE TO YOURSELF IN ONE NIGHT!
Send only 25c for test Course, "Molding a Mighty Arm." Read it the evening it arrives—learn from experience the thrill you can give your muscles!
SEND FOR THESE FIVE FAMOUS COURSES IN BOOK FORM ONLY 25c EACH or ALL 5 for $1.00
If you want a physique that will inspire respect from men and admiration from women . . . ACT LIKE A HE-MAN! Decide at once! The famous book, "Nerves of Steel—Muscles Like Iron" will be included FREE! Priceless for the strength fan! Full of photos of [illegible] who will show you what Jowett has done for them and how he can do the same for you. Reach out . . . Grasp this Special Offer today!
Jowett Institute, Dept. P-72
230 Fifth Avenue
New York 1, N. Y.
QUICK ACTION BRINGS THIS BOOK FREE!
PHOTO BOOK OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN FREE
Jowett Institute of Physical Culture, 230 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N.Y. Dept. P-72
George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below, for which I enclose ( ). Include FREE book of PHOTOS.
George F. Jowett Champion of Champions
☐ All 5 courses for.....$1 ☐ Molding Mighty Legs 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Arm 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Grip 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Back 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Chest 25c
☐ Send all 5 C.O.D. ($1 plus postage.) No orders less than $1 sent C.O.D.
NAME ..... Age.....
(Print name)
ADDRESS .....

Beware Coughs
from common colds
That Hang On

Creomulsion relieves promptly because it goes right to the seat of the trouble to help loosen and expel germ laden phlegm, and aid nature to soothe and heal raw, tender inflamed bronchial mucous membranes. Tell your druggist to sell you a bottle of Creomulsion with the understanding you must like the way it quickly allays the cough or you are to have your money back.

CREOMULSION

For Coughs, Chest Colds, Bronchitis

Opportunity of Lifetime

Supplying DDT and other profitable products to farmers. No experience or capital required. Must have auto and good references. Permanent. Write or wire.

McNESS COMPANY

Dept. 716-47 Freeport, Illinois

INVENTORS

Patent laws encourage the development of inventions. Our firm is registered to practice before the U. S. Patent Office. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.

McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
1506 Victor Building Washington 1, D. C.

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 46 years.
Benj. N. Bogue, Dept. 2987, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

Train Your Own HORSES!

Colts - Stock Horses - Circus Horses
Colt Show Horses - Write for FREE BOOK
ANIMAL LOVERS' ASSOCIATION
Box G-111, Tarzana, Calif.

Backache Whipped By Man and Wife

If you suffer from Backache, Leg or Rheumatic pains, Nervousness, Swollen Ankles, Burning Passages, Bladder Weakness, or Getting Up Nights, due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles, you may easily enjoy the delightful benefits experienced by thousands who have depended on Cystex for such troubles. The following letter from a well-known Massachusetts housewife is typical of those received from Cystex users all over the world: "I was so laid up with pains in my back, legs and arms that I was miserable. Finally I decided to try your Cystex. In a couple of weeks I was like a new person, the pains had left and I could walk anywhere. My husband had pains in his arms, took Cystex and the pains left." To prove what Cystex may do to bring you joyous help from the distress due to above mentioned Kidney and Bladder troubles, get Cystex from your druggist. Give it a fair trial exactly according to the simple directions. Unless completely satisfied and delighted with your rapid improvement, your money back is guaranteed. So don't suffer another day without trying Cystex.

up what I told you this morning. My horse is out behind the store and I got strength enough left to get you on him. Ride like hell, Rod."

"How about the nesters?" Rod Silvers asked softly.

"I'm gonna blow 'em to hell," Pete Martin said, "every one of them. It's because of them I got my guts ripped open and they're gonna pay." He started coughing violently and blood foamed across his thin lips. When he looked at Rod again every trace of the killer was gone from his face. He looked like any young kid that might ride in of a Saturday night to take a man's daughter to a dance. Rod remembered that he had looked that way at Susan's birthday party. When Rod started to speak, Pete grinned weakly and stopped him.

"I ain't soft, Rod," Pete Martin said. His breath was coming in gasps now and it was hard for him to speak. "After I'm gone they'll say I took twenty nesters with me. That's the way I want it to be and maybe the Devil will give me a soft job. But I want you to tell Susie different if she ever asks, Rod. I want you to tell her I was all right. If you don't, so help me God, I'll come back and haunt you." Rod Silvers nodded and he looked again at the wagons coming up the bridge road. He could make out the faces of the men now. Forrest — McKinley — Weatherford — They'd all be dead in another five minutes. Pete was speaking again.

"If it will make it any easier for you to tell her, it wasn't me that shot that nester woman. The man that shot her didn't come back with us this morning, Rod. Now head for that horse and ride like hell!"

Every ounce of killer violence was back in him now and he seemed to gain new strength from the seething hatred that was so much a part of him. He jabbed his gun into Rod's side and motioned toward the back of the store. Rod turned and started walking up the street toward the bridge. He heard Pete's voice, low and dangerous. "Where you going?"

"To blow that bridge now," Rod Silvers said. "Before they get here."

"Take another step and I'll blast you in

the back," Pete Martin said viciously.

"Go ahead," Rod Silvers said. "I'll still make it to the bridge in time."

He heard Pete Martin coming after him, shuffling along, more dead than alive, living only on nerve and killer lust.

"What do you want to save them nesters for?" Pete Martin pleaded. It sounded to Rod as if the man were yelling. "They'll hang you as quick as they will me. What do you want to help those dirty clodhoppers for?"

"You wouldn't understand, Pete." He kept walking and across the river the wagons started down the slope toward the bridge. Pete and Rod were close now.

For a second then Rod Silvers' mind was perfectly clear as the shock of the killing beat against his brain. There was a complete numbness in his body, but his mind and his vision were normal. He turned and looked into Pete's white face. Martin's eyes were glazing, but he was on his feet. His shirt and trousers were soaked with blood. "Run for it Rod," he pleaded. "Do it for Susie and Lucille. Take 'em some place where you won't get mixed up in a rotten business like you did here. For me it's all right, but they deserve better, Rod. You're no good to 'em dead."

"I got a job to finish, Pete."

"I'll tell the boys to clear out now before your nesters get here. I'll do that for you. If those nesters get ahold of you you'll swing from a limb. Damn it, ain't you got no sense? Go on back to Susie where you belong. I'll tell the boys to skin out now."

The words reached through, but they meant little. It was like a dead man talking to a dead man. All Rod Silvers knew for

A TOOLSHOP
IN YOUR HAND
Smooth, steady power at your fingertips! Plug Handee in any AC or DC socket, and you're ready to grind, drill, polish, rout, carve, sand, saw, engrave on metal, wood, plastic, horn, glass, etc. Weighs 12 oz. 25,000 r.p.m. In steel case with complete accessory assortment, postpaid, $27.50. Handee only with 7 accessories, $20.50.
A Fine Gift for a Friend or Yourself! Order Now! Prompt Delivery
FREE! 52-Page Manual
CHICAGO WHEEL & MFG. CO.
1101 Monroe St., Dept. PS, Chicago 7, Ill.
HANDEE
TOOL OF 1001 USES

ANYONE CAN DO THIS IF
THEY HAVE OUR CHART
SPECIAL OFFER FOR AGENTS
Blue Print 27"x36" now printed on both sides showing squares full size. Shows how to find the length of any rafter, find any angle in degrees, frame any polygon 3 to 16 sides, read the board foot and brace tables, octagon scale, rafter tables, many other uses can be scaled down for model work as well as full scale framing. Also chart changing pitches to degrees. For use with radial saws. About 13 square feet of printed copy. Sent post paid for $1. Money order or check—no stamps. MASON ENGINEERING SERVICE, 2104 N Burdick St., Dept. 2, Kalamazoo, 81, Mich.

DRAW for MONEY!
Be An ARTIST!
Trained Artists Are Capable of Earning $50, $60, $75 a Week
It's pleasant and interesting to study Art the W.S.A. way. COMMERCIAL ART, DESIGNING, CARTOONING all in ONE complete home study course. No previous art experience necessary—hundreds have profited by our practical methods since 1914. TWO ART OUTFITS furnished. Full information in FREE BOOK, "Art for Pleasure and Profit." Write today. Course available under "G.I." Bill.
FREE BOOK gives details
WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART,
Studio 242-H, 1115 15th St., N. W.
Washington 5, D. C.
NAME..... AGE.....
Street.....
City..... Zone ( ) State.....

Now A DYNAMIC HEAVY DUTY
INDUSTRIAL WELDER
FOR ONLY
$23.50
COMPLETE...
AVAILABLE NOW
IMMEDIATE DELIVERIES
IDEAL FOR AUTO - HOME APPLIANCE AND FARM REPAIRS
DESIGNED TO DO HIGH GRADE WELDING INEXPENSIVELY—Maintenance Men; Farmers; Mechanics; Machine Shops; Foundries; Auto, General Repair and Job Welding Shops; all using the DYNAMIC find it so indispensable and useful that they cannot afford to be without it. If inexperienced, you can easily learn to do a variety of high grade welding jobs by following the practical, simplified operating and welding instructions furnished. Once you see a DYNAMIC in operation, you won't want to be without it. Its simplicity will amaze you. In a year the DYNAMIC only costs you about 6c a day. Helmet, rods, cables, holder and operating instructions, etc., furnished.
SAVES YOU VALUABLE TIME AND MONEY!
This portable DYNAMIC WELDER—easily carried to the job—can be operated from any convenient, properly wired 110 volt, 60 cycle line. Can also be supplied for 220 volt, 60 cycle operation and for other voltages and cycles at slight additional cost. Works on IRON, STEEL, BRASS, BRONZE, AND OTHER METALS—has 8 metallic and carbon arc welding heat stages—does work you would think only possible with larger more expensive machine.
DYNAMIC WELDER CO. • 13 East 23rd St., NH, Chicago 16, Ill.
WRITE TODAY FOR PARTICULARS
Get details on our 10 day trial offer.
Member Chicago Association of Commerce

How to Start YOUR OWN BUSINESS

Amazing Postwar Development Now Gives
You the Opportunity to Make Money Fast!

Startling scientific discovery, just now becoming available for general use, will enable you to start your business and reap great profits!

Plastics, one of the most revolutionizing and rapidly expanding industries, offers a great opportunity to all enterprising men and women. This is one of the few industries in which home manufacturers thrive and prosper. You can start even on a spare time basis in your own home, and expand rapidly into a full time business, paying good profits.

LIQUID MARBLE

Make LIQUID MARBLE the amazing Plastic, with a thousand uses. LIQUID MARBLE can be poured into FLEXIBLE MOLDS for casting all kinds of artistic and serviceable articles such as: ornaments, novelties, desk sets, paper weights, book-ends, souvenirs, statuary, toys, etc.

FLEXIBLE MOLDS

Make your own FLEXIBLE MOLDS. The cost is low—in fact, a large sized mold costs but a few cents. Hundreds of casts can be taken from a single mold.

NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED!

No skill or previous knowledge is necessary. All you do is follow our easy-to-understand instructions.

UNLIMITED MARKET

The market is literally unlimited. You will find steady year-round demand in your own community. Your problem will not be in Selling but in supplying the huge pent-up demand. Moreover, we supply you with names of **big buyers** for your finished products.

WRITE TODAY

Bing Products will show you how to start with a small investment and build a permanent, independent, profitable business! Don't fail to grasp this opportunity! Write today for FREE CATALOG.

BING PRODUCTS
Dept. M1, 88 Broad Street, BOSTON 10, MASS.

MAKE BIG WAGES IN WELDING
Learn welding in all its phases in modern welding school. Experienced welder-instructors, individual instruction. Qualified under G. I. Bill. Write for FREE booklet.
HOBART TRADE SCHOOL, BOX G-27, TROY, OHIO

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure booklet containing information concerning patent protection and procedure—without obligation.
CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
726-A District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

Learn to MOUNT BIRDS

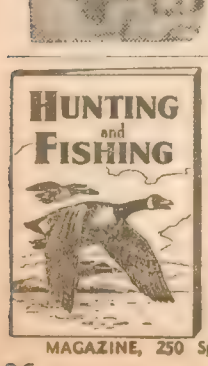
Tan SKINS, Make Up FURS

Be a Taxidermist. We teach you at Home. Mount Birds, Animals, Pets, Game Heads, Fish. Save your hunting trophies; decorate home and den. MAKE MONEY. Mount and Krome-tan for others. Big spare-time profits.

FREE BOOK 100 game pictures 48 pages - Hunters, get this wonderful book. It's Now Free. Send post card TODAY. State your AGE.
NORTHWEST SCHOOL of TAXIDERMY
Dept. 3362 Omaha, Nebraska

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50 Many Swedish Massage graduates make $50, $75 or even more per week. Larger full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE—NOW!
The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 7968, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11



HUNTING & FISHING

is a monthly magazine crammed full of hunting, fishing, camping, dog and boating stories and pictures, invaluable information about guns, fishing tackle, game law changes, best places to fish and hunt—countless ideas that will add more fun to your days afield.

Special Trial Offer

Send 25c in stamps or coin and we will send you Hunting & Fishing for six months.

HUNTING & FISHING
MAGAZINE, 250 Sportsman's Bldg., Boston, Mass.

sure was that Pete Martin nor anyone else could stop this needless slaughter now. There was only one way, and that was to blow the bridge before the wagons got there. There was only a matter of seconds left, so he pulled out of Pete's grasp and started toward the embankment. His leg buckled again and he fell.

As he tried to crawl toward the river he heard Pete Martin say clearly, "Damn if I can understand a blockhead like you, but there's no use of both of us dying." Then there were stars and an inky blackness as Pete Martin's gun barrel cracked against Rod's throbbing skull.

THE STEADY roar that rolled against his ear drums brought Rod Silvers back to his senses. He was still lying in the street and the ground was shaking under him. There was a babble of voices and the sound of horses being ridden fast. He crawled on hands and knees a half a block and he saw the old Lacey Prentice crowd hitting leather out of town. He shook his head, trying to remember what it was all about, and his eyes focused slowly.

That rumbling noise had been the explosion. The air, above where the bridge had stood, was full of black dust and smoke and the river was being pocked by still falling debris. It all came back to him now—the nesters—Pete Martin's last kill-crazy desire. He turned, violently sick at the sight, and then he heard excited shouts across the river. Peering through the fast-settling dust cloud he saw the wagons of the nesters just pulling up on the opposite side. They were fighting their fear-crazed teams. Rod Silvers fell back into a pit of blackness.

They told him later how it had happened. They made rafts and came across the river to find a deserted town. By the time Rod's leg had healed some, a new bridge was under way and the nesters were ferrying their stuff across for the time being.

Al Sanberg, the sheriff, conducted the investigation, and Rod Silvers turned in his badge. He told the sheriff the truth about things and all through the investigation Lucille sat by his side, her chin out, pride in every line of her face. And when it was all over the jury of nesters cleared him

of blame and he walked out a free man.

He stood there a long time, Lucille on one side of him, Susan on the other, and he breathed deeply of the cool, clear air, damp with the first rain. He was broke and out of a job, but somehow it didn't seem so tragic this time. He had the courage of knowing he had played it according to the rules, and that knowledge would carry him through. He held his daughter close and kissed his future wife and it was then he saw she was laughing through her tears. "You better turn around," she said. The sheriff and a half-dozen nesters stood on the porch of the hotel where the investigation had been held. "I think they have something for you," Lucille said, and she started to cry, but it was a happy sort of crying.

The sheriff walked down the steps and handed a leather-covered box to Rod Silvers. "The people of Bainville wanted you to have this," he said, then he went down the street without saying a thing. The nesters went back into the hotel.

Slowly Rod opened the box, then he closed it as the lump in his throat threatened to choke off his breath. Together the three of them walked down the street. He didn't need to ask if they had seen what was in the box, for he knew they had

It was a new marshal's badge they had given to Rod Silvers. The thing that made him know Lucille and Susan had seen it before was the little blue paper star stuck on one corner.

It was the kind of star Lucille Brown always gave the kids at school when they played by the rules. . . .

THE END

NEW MIDGET ELECTRIC ARC WELDER

RETAILS ONLY $3.95

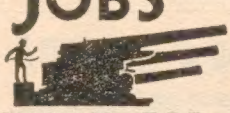
FULLY GUARANTEED

Plugs into Light Socket AC or DC

It's new! It's handy! It's efficient! Use the Midget Electric Arc Welder for hundreds of light-metal jobs. Does comparable welding work with a 1/16 inch welding rod on thin metal as that of larger and higher priced welders. Operates on 15 ampere fuse, 110 volt 60 cycle A.C. or D.C. current, by use of our special standard-coated 1/16-inch welding rods. Generous supply of rods supplied with machine. Recommended for all light welding like automobile fenders, etc. Take the Midget Arc anywhere to the job. Sturdily built and fully guaranteed. Comes complete—ready to use. Nothing else to buy. No previous welding experience needed to strike an arc. In a short time, anyone mechanically inclined can learn to weld with this machine. You'll find hundreds of money-saving, time-saving uses for the Midget Arc around your home, garage, or workshop. Also in garages, factories, repair shops, tin shops, mechanics, farmers, inventors, etc. Order a Midget Electric Arc Welder now! SEND NO MONEY. We'll rush one to you, complete with rods and helmet (equipped with APPROVED welding glass). Pay postman only $3.95 plus postage charges. If not satisfied, return Midget Arc in 5 days from receipt and we'll refund your money immediately. RUSH YOUR ORDER NOW.

MIDGET ARC WELDER CO., Strader Ave., Dept. S-228. Cincinnati 26, Ohio

JOBS NOT BOMBS for AMERICANS



WORK FOR "UNCLE SAM"

START

$1756 to $3021 Year

Men—Women

Prepare Now for 1947 Examinations. Veterans Get Special Preference. Mail Coupon Today

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. D-89, Rochester 4, N. Y.
Sirs: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of many U. S. Government Big Pay Jobs. (2) Tell me how to prepare for one of these jobs.
Name.....
Address.....Vet?

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL

CAN YOU FIX IT?
These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

6 BIG VOLUMES
2800 pages, 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Diesel Engines. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of Six Big Auto Books, 20th Edition. Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW HOLD A PERMANENT JOB
America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the JIFFY INDEX to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon TODAY.

A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge.

Vocational Publishers Since 1898

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A231
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.
I would like to examine your Six-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you $2 and pay the balance at the rate of only $3 a month until $24.80 has been paid. Please include consulting service as offered above.
Name .....
Address .....
City ..... State .....
Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

Now for EVERY WORK SHOP!

"NEW *Invention* **Electroplates** *by* **BRUSH**

Easy to Plate CHROMIUM GOLD, SILVER, NICKEL, COPPER
. . . For Pleasure and Profit!

If you have a workshop—at home or in business—you need this new Warner Electroplater. At the stroke of an electrified brush, you can electroplate models and projects—you can replate worn articles, faucets, tools, fixtures, silverware, etc. with a durable, sparkling coat of metal . . . Gold, Silver, Chromium, Nickel, Copper or Cadmium. Method is easy, simple, quick. Everything furnished—equipment complete, ready for use. *By doing a bit of work for others, your machine can pay for itself within a week.* So make your shop complete by getting a Warner Electroplater right away. Send today for FREE SAMPLE and illustrated literature. ACT AT ONCE! *Mail Coupon.*

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., DEPT. L-20
1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Ill.

FREE *Details & Sample!*

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., 1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Dept. L-20
Gentlemen: Send Free Sample and Details to:
*Name*_____
*Address*_____
City *State*

(Continued from page 38)

"How much is this stuff worth, Allbright?" Bragin asked the merchant worriedly.

" 'Bout eighty dollars, so far."

Bragin counted on his fingers. "Five days work. Eighty dollars makes danged good wages. Mebbe we better reconsider our agreement, Ossie—!"

Ossie waved a airy hand. "Wouldn't think of it. Takes mutual agreement, you know, and I ain't feeling so mutual. Allbright, throw in a few more bacon sides. And them canned lobsters you said cost a dollar a can. I'll take a gross."

"Listen, Ossie!" There was real concern in the lawyer's face. "Supposin' I give you back your thousand dollars and let you keep what you're already bought and tear up that paper?"

"Got it with you?"

"I can get it."

"Get it," Ossie told him. "Only it takes one more thing to make us even. When you come back, you're going to take a whipping."

OSSIE MALONE did not turn in to the Bar B, on his return, but kept right on going in the direction of the Slash S. He had a black eye and a pleasant memory of having left Sandy Bragin stretched cold on the sidewalk. The hayrack was loaded with provisions. At first he had intended turning them over to the Spencers as payment for the fresh trouble Sandy Bragin had caused them. But as the wagon clattered down the dusty ruts he began to get a new idea.

Deke Spencer came out when Ossie drove into the yard. Ossie grinned at him. "Howdy, Deke. Can you use a good man?"

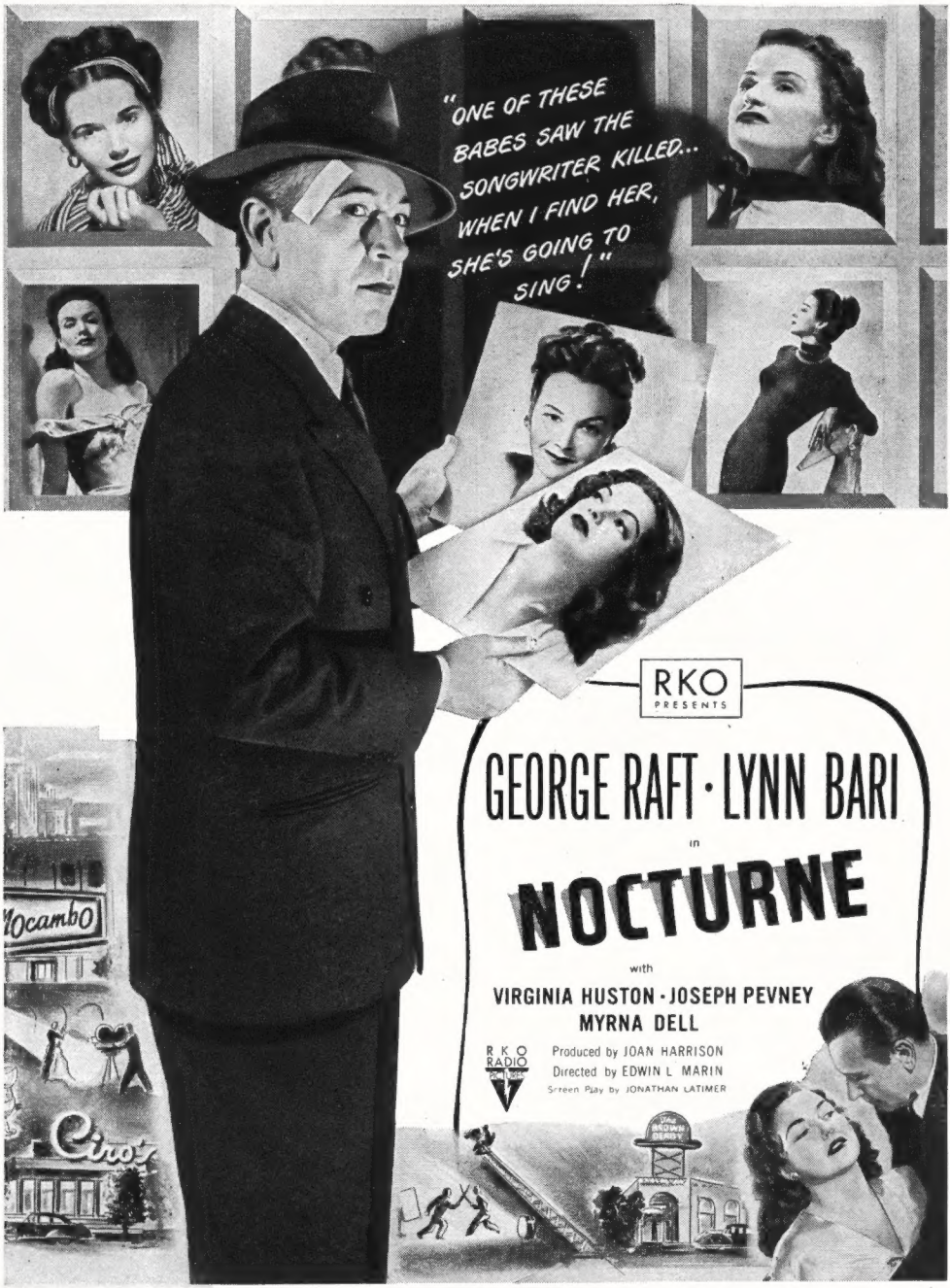
The oldster's reply was indirect. He turned toward the house. "Hey, Dotty, come out! Here's a man come to work for us bringing his own grub!"

Dot came across the yard, pretty as a picture in a freshly starched apron and dress. She regarded Ossie and the loaded hayrack and smiled.

"Howdy, mister! Like I was saying only yesterday, you sure are the go-gettin'est man!"

HOLLYWOOD'S TEN MOST BEAUTIFUL BRUNETTES

... All with motives for Murder!



"Hmm—more smart people making tracks for Calvert!"

The sensible trend's to Calvert! Sensible... because it's the "whiskey of moderation"... blessed with friendly lightness... congenial taste... all-around whiskey agreeableness. We suggest you try it. Then you, too, will understand why...

Clear Heads Choose Calvert

Calvert

BLENDED WHISKIES

Reserve OR *Special*

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits ... Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits